Saturday, February 5, 2022 ₹ 75

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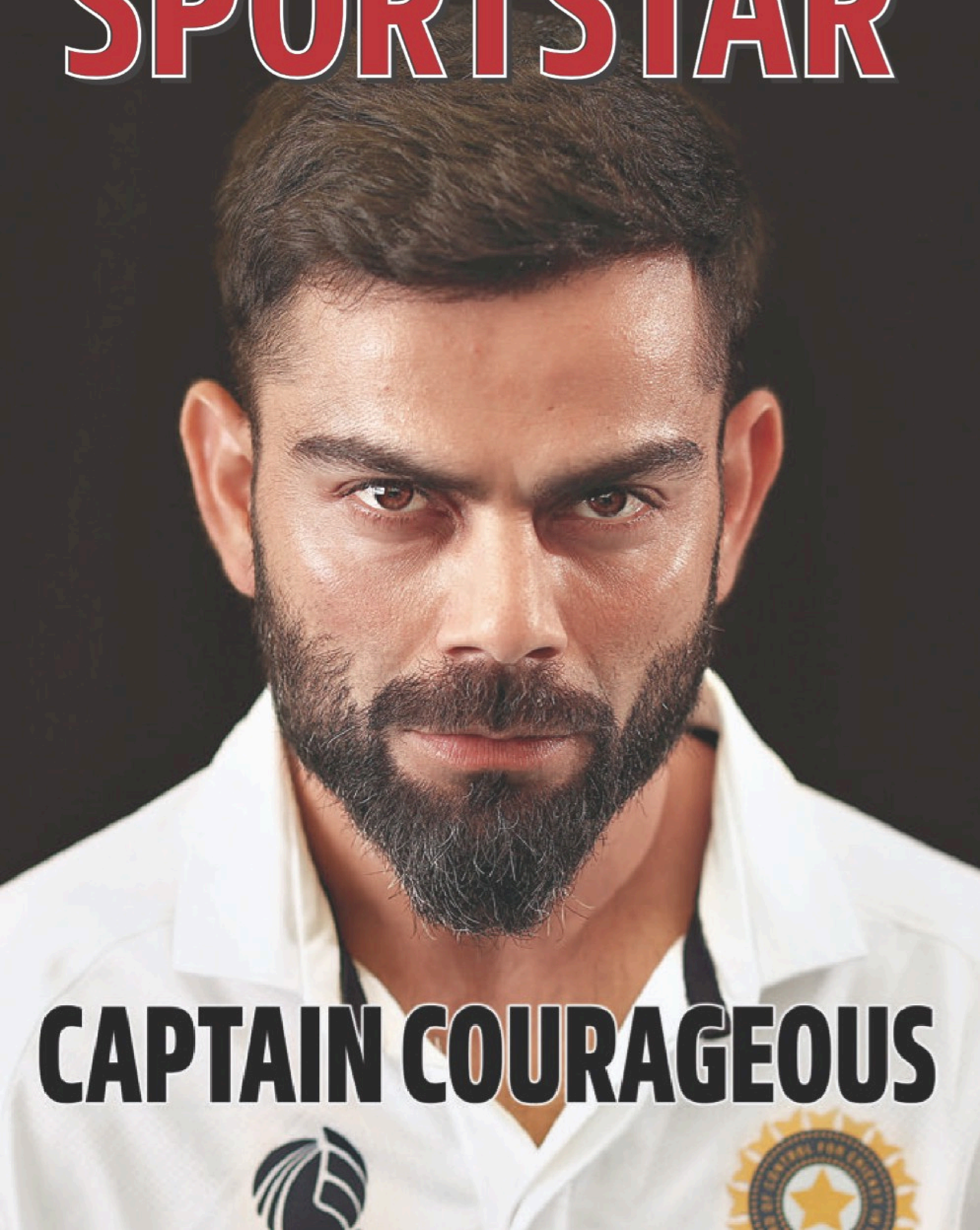

CAPTAIN COURAGEOUS

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SPORTSTAR

Saturday, February 5, 2022
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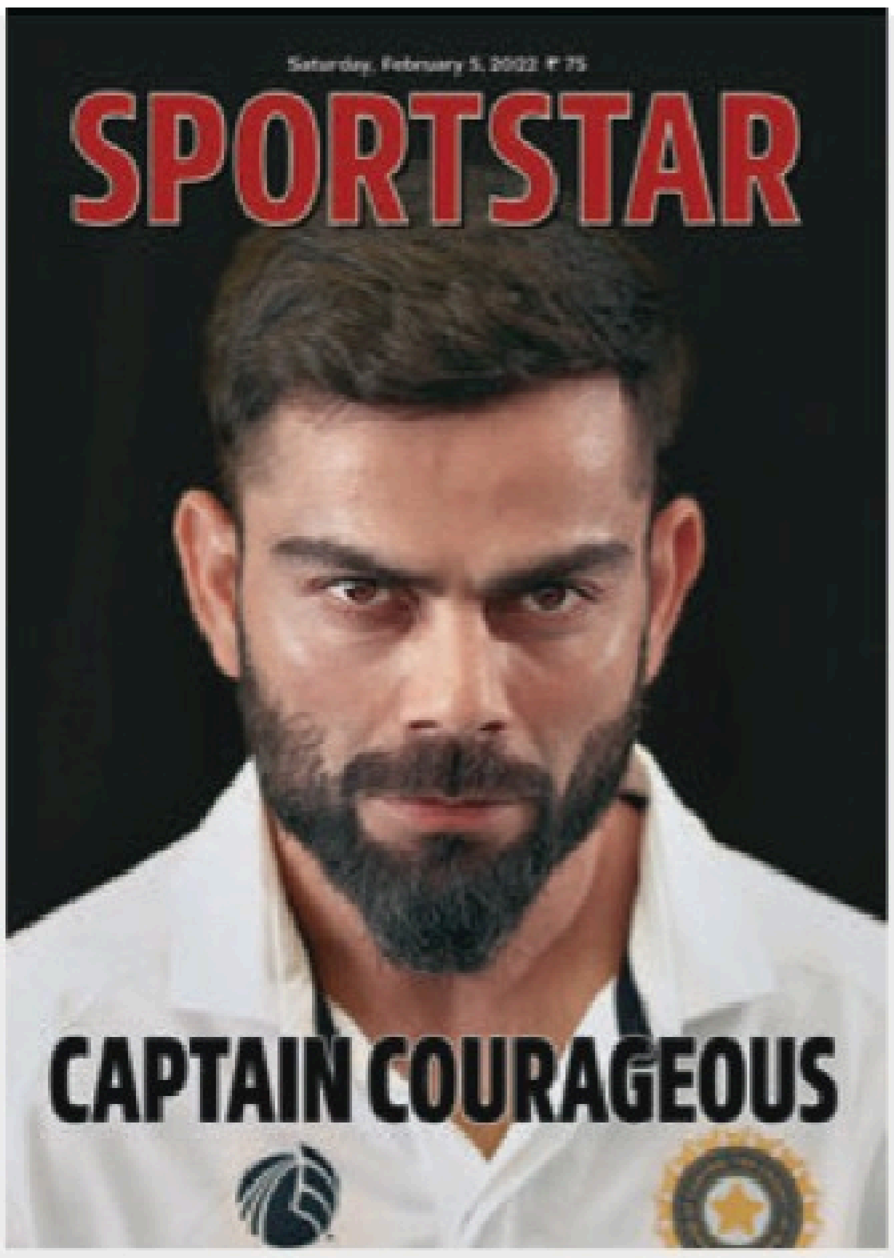

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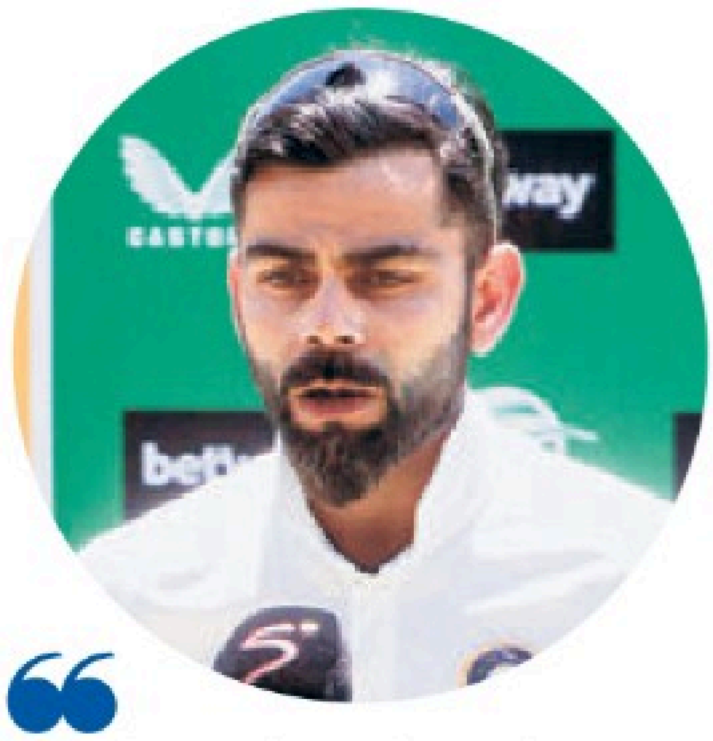


“I’ve done the job with absolute honesty and left nothing out there. Everything has to come to a halt at some stage and for me as Test captain of India, it’s now.”

— VIRAT KOHLI ANNOUNCING HIS DECISION TO STEP DOWN AS INDIA CRICKET TEST CAPTAIN.

“The road to success isn’t easy and, sadly, nowadays in football there is a search for immediate results and there is always less and less patience; unfortunately circumstances have determined the results and it won’t be possible to continue this project.”

— RAFAEL BENITEZ AFTER BEING SACKED BY EVERTON.

Djokovic deported after two-week visa battle

REUTERS

World No. 1 Novak Djokovic will not be defending his Australian Open crown, after all. After days of drama, Australia’s Federal Court upheld the government’s decision to cancel his visa, forcing him to be deported from the country a day before the commencement of the main draw of Australian Open.

The unanimous ruling by a three-judge bench dealt a final blow to Djokovic’s hopes of chasing a record 21st Grand Slam win at the Australian Open.

Unvaccinated Djokovic had been granted a visa to enter Australia, with a COVID-19 infection on December 16 providing the basis for a medical exemption from Australia’s requirements that all visitors be vaccinated. That exemption prompted widespread anger in Australia.

He was first detained by immigration authorities on January 6, ordered to be released by a court on January 10 and then detained again after immigration minister Alex Hawke used his discretionary powers to cancel the visa. The minister had said Djokovic could be a threat to public order because his presence would encourage anti-vaccination sentiment.

Djokovic said after the ruling he was extremely disappointed as it meant he could not take part in the tournament.

“I respect the court’s ruling and I will cooperate with the relevant authorities in relation to my departure from the country,” he said. “I am uncomfortable that the focus of the past weeks has been on me and I hope that we can all now focus on the game and tournament I love.”

Olympic medallist Deon Lendore dies in car crash

Trinidad and Tobago’s Olympic and world 4x400m relay medallist Deon Lendore has been killed in a car crash in Texas at the age of 29.

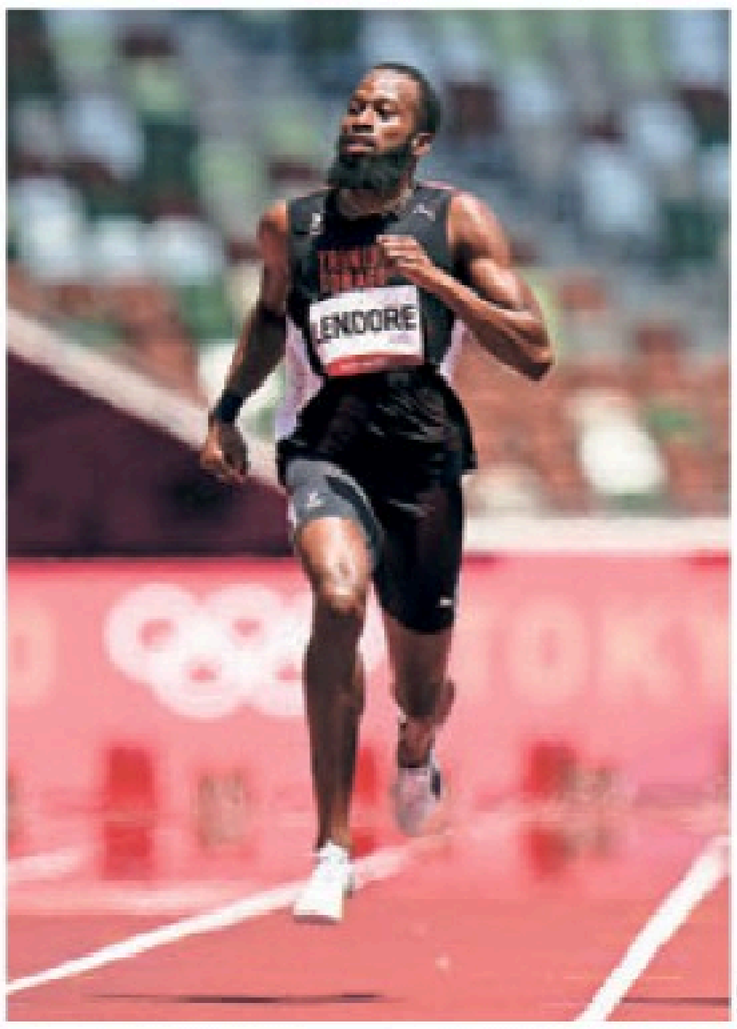
Lendore was driving home after coaching at Texas A&M University.

He anchored his country to a bronze medal at London 2012 and also competed at the Rio and Tokyo Olympics.

“Deon has flown the Trinidad and Tobago flag with pride, honour, patriotism and an indomitable will,” said the Trinidad and Tobago Olympic Committee.

“He has been an inspiration and motivation to us all, both on and off the track.”

Lendore also won relay silver at the World Championships in Beijing in 2015, and took individual bronze at the following year’s World Indoors in Portland, Oregon.



AP

Hall of Famer Chris Evert reveals she has ovarian cancer

Former tennis star Chris Evert says she was diagnosed with an early stage of ovarian cancer.

"I've lived a very charmed life. Now I have some challenges ahead of me," Evert said. "But I have comfort in knowing the chemotherapy is to ensure that cancer does not come back."

Evert won 18 Grand Slam singles titles, reached No. 1 in the WTA rankings and was inducted into the International Hall of Fame in 1995.

Her sister, Jeanne Evert Dubin, died from ovarian cancer in February 2020 at age 62.

"Be your own advocate. Know your family's history. Have total awareness of your body, follow your gut and be aware of changes," Evert said in the *ESPN* story. "Don't try to be a crusader and think this will pass."

REUTERS

Denmark boycotts Beijing Olympics over human rights

Denmark will not send an official diplomatic delegation to the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics due to human rights issues in the host country.

The decision comes after EU countries failed to agree a common stance at a meeting in Brest recently.

A U.S. boycott to protest against China's human rights record has been joined by Australia, Britain, Canada and Japan.

The Netherlands will also not send an official diplomatic delegation to the Olympics because of COVID-19 restrictions, a foreign ministry spokesperson said earlier.

China has denied the rights abuses and has condemned the boycott as betraying Olympic principles.

Uchimura calls it a day

Japan's two-time Olympic all-around champion Kohei Uchimura announced his retirement, bringing an end to the career of one of the best male gymnasts of all time.

Dubbed "King Kohei" in Japan, Uchimura won a total of seven Olympic medals, including three golds, in Beijing, London and Rio but came away empty handed from the Tokyo Games last year.

Uchimura won every world and Olympic all-around title from 2009 to 2016. He became the first man in 44 years to top the individual all-around podium in back-to-back Olympics with a nail-biting final in the 2016 Rio Games.

His Olympic career came to an abrupt end in Tokyo when he lost his grip on the bar and crashed to the floor, failing to qualify for the finals.

He said at the time: "In the last three Olympics I took part in, I was always able to bring out in competition what I practised, but I can't do that anymore. I'm past my peak. I just have to accept that calmly."

AFP

THE CAPTAIN OF ALL CAPTAINS

WRIDDHAAYAN BHATTACHARYYA

There are captains on the cricket field, and then there are leaders. Virat Kohli is a leader. And the superman batter's resignation from Test captaincy will not impair the side that bloomed under him. He will continue to plant seeds of leadership among the younger crop.

As Kohli prepares for his new innings, just as a batter, it is imperative to note how the leader introduced a growing belief to win from any situation in any format, a fitness culture in the cricketing ecosystem, and a pace-bowling pack to win Test matches overseas.

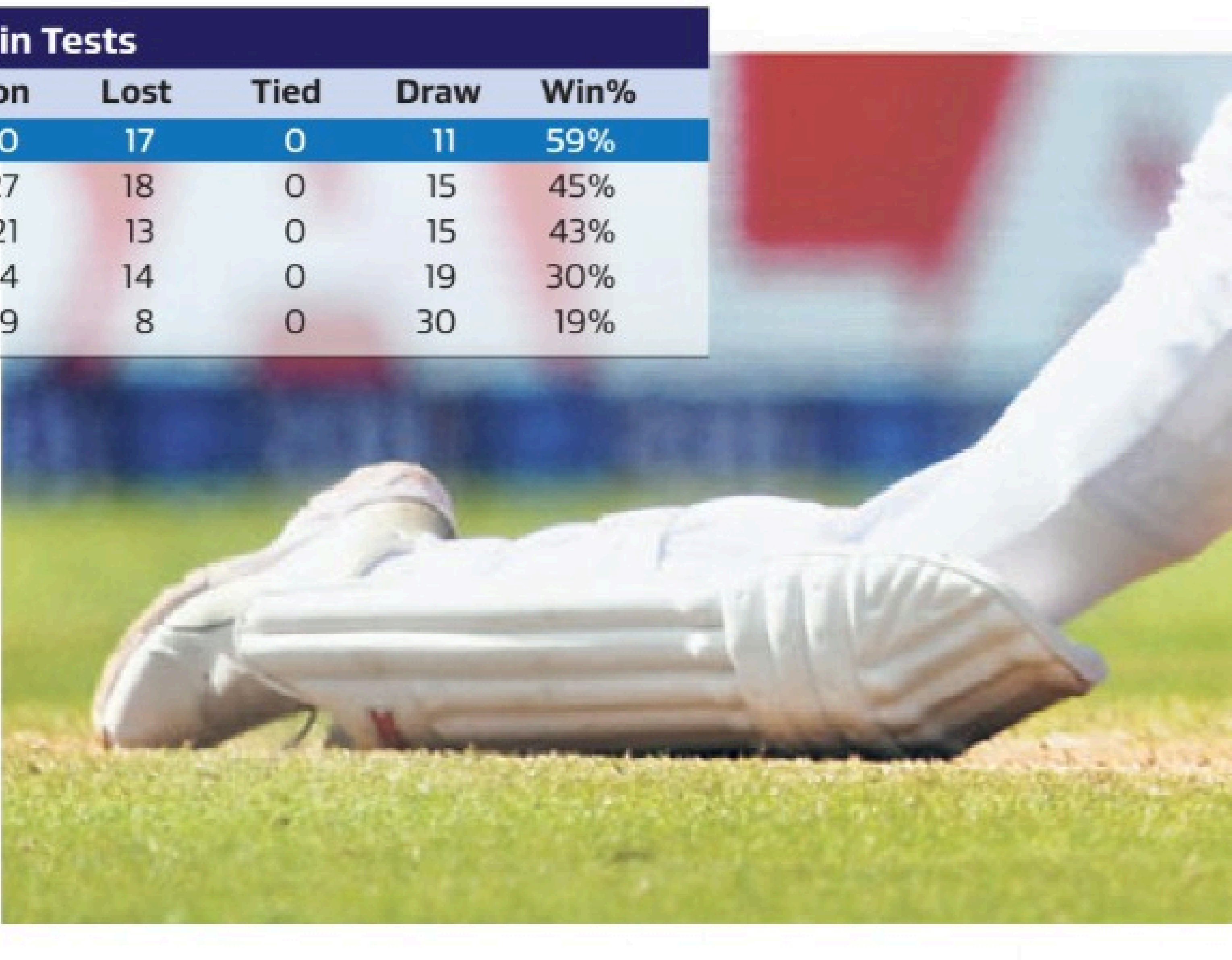
> Virat Kohli has been the most successful Test skipper of India with 40 wins, and though he did not win the World Cup, the ODI numbers are at par with legends.

ODI records

Kohli did not win ICC trophies in white-ball cricket, but he is the third-best ODI skipper [minimum 90 matches] with a win percent of 70.43. Former Australia captain Ricky Ponting, who won two World Cups, tops the chart with 76. 14 percent, followed by the late Hansie Cronje of South Africa, who stands at 73.70 percent.

Most matches as captain of Team India in Tests

Player	Matches	Won	Lost	Tied	Draw	Win%
Virat Kohli	68	40	17	0	11	59%
MS Dhoni	60	27	18	0	15	45%
Sourav Ganguly	49	21	13	0	15	43%
Mohammad Azharuddin	47	14	14	0	19	30%
Sunil Gavaskar	47	9	8	0	30	19%



And India won 15 out of 19 bilateral series under Kohli that included victories in South Africa, Australia, and the West Indies.

The 5-1 series triumph in South Africa in 2018 would rank as one of his best as he registered three centuries, including an unbeaten 160 at Cape Town.

Kohli has been fiercely competitive as captain-batter. The right-hander scored 21 centuries — the most by an Indian captain in the format. He is only behind Ponting, who smashed 22, but the Australian was captain for 10 years, whereas the Indian got the full-time role in white-ball in January 2017 when Mahendra Singh Dhoni stepped down.

Kohli has the best average (72.65) as ODI captain [minimum 75 games]. South Africa legend AB de Villiers is second at 63. 94 in 103 games.

T20I milestones

The run machine is a different beast in T20Is. He learnt the art of chasing from his predecessor, Dhoni. And as captain, he won 30 out of 50 games with 16 losses.

Kohli is the second-highest run-scorer (1,570) in T20Is as captain, after Aaron Finch (1,724) in 56 games. But he was the fastest among all captains to reach 1,000 T20I runs [30 innings]. Pakistan skipper Babar Azam broke the record recently by achieving the feat in his 26th.

The unbeaten 94 off 50 against West Indies in Hyderabad stands tall among the top performances. Kohli hit six fours and as many sixes to help chase down the target of 208 with eight balls to spare. The 54-ball 82 against Sri Lanka in Colombo in 2017 comes second in terms of impact knocks.

The Test ace

He is a true ambassador of Test cricket. He likes challenges, especially when playing overseas. The process to become a superpower in the red-ball format began in 2014-15. He had challenged a ferocious Mitchell Johnson in the tour Down Under.

India lost the series, but Kohli won. A young leader then, Kohli was straight out of the wild west. He fought fire with fire. And he scored four centuries in the series — three as captain, two of which came in the Adelaide Test that India lost by only 48 runs while chasing 364.

Knight in white: Virat Kohli is a true ambassador of Test cricket. He likes challenges, especially when playing overseas. PTI

Four years later, he completed the devastation of the Aussies in the tour of 2018-19 with his pace pack — comprising Mohammed Shami, Ishant Sharma, and Jasprit Bumrah — breathing fire.

In 2021, the 2-1 domination in England — with one more Test to go — completed the full circle.

Kohli has led India in 68 Tests, the most by any player, and he won 40 of them. He is the most successful captain in the format with a win percent of 59; Dhoni won 27 out of 60 Tests, and his percentage reads 45. In world cricket, only Graeme Smith of South Africa (53), Ponting (48), and Steve Waugh (41) have won more Tests than Kohli.

Hot and moody

Kohli perhaps could have handled the limited-overs careers of R. Ashwin, Kuldeep Yadav, and Yuzvendra Chahal better.

Ashwin had disappeared after the Champions Trophy in 2017. He made a comeback after four years in the T20 World Cup. The wrist spin duo of Kuldeep and Chahal, groomed as specialists in the shortest format, never made it to the squad.

The moody Delhi boy often ran into trouble for his blunt nature. He calls a spade a spade, and it never mattered if the world agreed or not. At times, the anger also backfired, like the recent stump mic chatter at Cape Town. South Africa found motivation in the emotional outburst and took the game away.

But any player leading the side for more than five years leaves an impact. And by now, every player in the team has a bit of Kohli in them. The aggression will not die, and if there are doubts, one can rewind to 2012 to catch his 133 not out blitzkrieg in 86 balls against Sri Lanka in Hobart.

He was a batter then, and he will be a batter again.

Most Runs as skipper in Tests

Player	Matches	Runs	HS	100s	50s	Avg.
Graeme Smith (ICC/SA)	109	8659	277	25	36	48
Allan Border (AUS)	93	6623	205	15	36	51
Ricky Ponting (AUS)	77	6542	209	19	35	52
Virat Kohli (IND)	68	5864	254*	20	18	55
Clive Lloyd (WI)	74	5233	242*	14	27	51

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Future uncertain for Pujara-Rahane as Captain Kohli checks out

The unexpected failure in South Africa has brought an end to Virat Kohli's entertaining and fruitful seven-year reign as India's Test captain. No player is greater than the game, but we shall miss the aggression that marked Kohli's tenure.

VIJAY LOKAPALLY

Unburdened: With the pressures of captaincy off his mind, Virat Kohli can be his natural self, the free-flowing all-format batter.
AFP

The best travelling unit that Ravi Shastri proclaimed has lost its way. The fabulous start to 2021 at Gabba now lies buried under the pasting Virat Kohli's team got in Cape Town at the hands of an opposition that was hardly considered a threat in most of the pre-series assessments. The unexpected failure also brought an end to Kohli's entertaining and fruitful seven-year reign as India's Test captain.

The way the series took off with India finishing the first day at 272 for three, should have set the trend. KL Rahul's century ensured a thumping win. The performance was so emphatic that Sunil Gavaskar predicted a 3-0 triumph.

Gavaskar was not at fault. Kohli's Indian team — basking in its performance in Australia and England — was touted as the best combination in the world of Test cricket. South Africa, on the other hand, struggled to field a strong combination in the wake of some retirements and pullouts — AB de Villiers and Quinton de Kock. In the absence of Anrich Nortje, even the bowling was not at its best for the home team.

This was supposed to be India's best chance to make history by winning its first-ever series in South Africa. The win in Centurion, India's first at the venue, promised a

AJINKYA
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Past their prime: In South Africa, the trusted pair of Cheteshwar Pujara and Ajinkya Rahane offered little resistance against the marauding South African bowlers. REUTERS

lot. But it fell flat in the next two matches, exposing India's shortcomings. There was not one session of domination from the team which had won the first Test so comprehensively.

The famed Indian batting lineup, especially the middle-order, had no answer to the South African fast bowlers. Once again, the fallibility against the ball when it moves, or bounces showed the Indian batters in poor light. There was little resistance from the trusted pair of Cheteshwar Pujara and Ajinkya Rahane.

Even Virat Kohli was a shadow of the domineering batter he is known to be.

The burning question right through was the inclusion of Rahane and Pujara in the playing XI even as they evidently struggled to get right their temperament and footwork. It was obvious they were riding on their reputation when the reality was begging them to concede their spots to the likes of Hanuma Vihari and Shreyas Iyer. Too long a rope for these veterans was the growing refrain in the cricket fraternity.

Barring Rishabh Pant, the Indian batting lacks a match-winner. Kohli, the best batter on either side, was sadly not at his best, with technical flaws creeping into his batting. His 79 off 201 balls notwithstanding in the final Test, his lack of confidence was evident while dealing with a dedicated outside the off-stump corridor pursued by the South African bowlers.

India's woes multiplied as Kohli was torn by this predicament to attack or wait.

Kohli missed the second Test and returned to a team that appeared short of plans and ideas. By sticking to Rahane and Pujara, the team management, much against the wishes of Kohli, displayed a defeatist mindset.

The much-awaited change of culture in the dressing room may yet take time to find its roots. It is not fair to expect Rahul Dravid to ring in sweeping reforms. In five Tests, he has dealt with three captains – Rahane, Rahul, and Kohli. It should be remembered that patience was Dravid's greatest virtue as a batter and he is not going to discard that policy when evaluating his team. Rahane and Pujara would have been relieved at his appointment, but they failed to chip in.

The gains of Australia were lost in South Africa. The first day in Centurion was an aberration for South Africa but it came back with amazing confidence in Johannesburg and Cape Town, winning by seven wickets on both occasions.

Much had been made of the Last Frontier campaign, but India came a cropper because of its batting failures. The strong batting that India boasted was dismantled by the relatively inexperienced — apart from Kagiso Rabada — South African attack.

South Africa gained by its belief that it

The next step: The 2-1 series loss to South Africa poses new challenges to the Indian selectors. To find a new Test captain, and replacements for Rahane and Pujara. REUTERS

had little to lose against an opposition that had greater claims as a Test combination. The Gabba win was a classic for all ages and much of the expectations of a series win in South Africa had been built on the overall performance of the team through the year. It came to naught in South Africa as India's batters let the team down.

India also incurred the wrath of its critics because of the on-field behaviour of a few players including skipper Kohli. The captain was guilty of letting his frustration get the better of him.

True, his trademark aggression appeals to the young fans, but it did not go down well with many connoisseurs of cricket, who expect the captain to set an example on the field. These are tough times for Kohli, battling poor form. But by relinquishing captaincy and leaving the choice of deciding the fate of Pujara and Rahane with the selectors, Kohli has spoken his mind.

India can't afford to bear the burden of two non-performing batters in the middle order. Flawed footwork has shackled Pujara and Rahane. The duo has played match-winning roles in the past. But their lack of consistency has hurt the team big. The pressure to deliver has only increased on Rahane and Pujara. The South African tour has only hastened their departure and Kohli, too, had sensed the end of the road for his long-time comrades.

It is hardly surprising that Kohli wants to just concentrate on his batting now. The apparent breakdown of communication with the Board president Sourav Ganguly and the new selection committee chairman went a long way in convincing Kohli that his contributions to Indian cricket were being undermined during times when he needed support. Constant leaks in the media questioning his integrity and his own form proved a lethal combination for Kohli to relinquish the Test captaincy.

It was time for him to move on. No player is greater than the game, but we shall miss the aggression that marked Kohli's tenure. He also matched the aggression with deeds. With the pressures of captaincy off his mind, Kohli can be his natural self, the free-flowing all-format batter.

The task of the selectors is, now, challenging. To find a new Test captain, and replacements for Rahane and Pujara and for the team management to accept that while bowlers win you Tests, batters set them up. It is imperative that the process that one keeps hearing from the coach and the selectors is now put on a course where performance and nothing else should matter. Dravid should know it best. He had lost one season before getting a chance at Lord's. It is for him to give shape to the expectations of his admirers. Perform or perish should be the norm since India has a strong pool of players waiting to step in.

Kohli stands tall: India's Test captain Virat Kohli, who missed the second Test due to injury, top-scored on day one of the series decider against South Africa in Cape Town. Kohli notched up a patient 79 off 201 balls, but the tourist was still all out for 223. Kohli showed unwavering discipline in challenging circumstances, putting on 62 for the third wicket with Cheteshwar Pujara before left-arm seamer Marco Jansen got Pujara caught behind for 43. Kohli followed up his first-innings 79 with an equally gritty 143-ball 29 in the third innings. GETTY IMAGES

Breathing fire: Kagiso Rabada's 4 for 73 helped South Africa dismiss India for less than 250. Rabada snared opener Mayank Agarwal, caught by Aiden Markram, as the first of his four victims. He claimed his second wicket of the day when Ajinkya Rahane went for nine, caught behind. He then picked up the crucial wickets of Virat Kohli and tail-ender Jasprit Bumrah as India lost its last five for just 56 runs. Rabada was equally impressive in the third innings, returning figures of 3 for 53. GETTY IMAGES

Standout performer: Keegan Petersen was the Player of the Match and Player of the series for his match-winning 72 and a career-best 82 at Newlands. Before this series, he had scored 44 runs in three innings on South Africa's tour of the West Indies six months ago. "He's dominated domestic cricket, awesome to see him have a great series. Long may he grow, there's lot of improvement from his point of view. World is his oyster. Proud of what he has achieved," skipper Dean Elgar said about Petersen after the win.GETTY IMAGES

Owning the stage: Jasprit Bumrah's return to the scene of his 2018 Test debut turned sweeter after he grabbed his seventh five-for with figures of 5 for 42 in South Africa's first innings. His spell helped India take a slender 13-run lead. His dismissal of Aiden Markram stood out. The ball jagged back in sharply from outside off, and Markram chose to shoulder arms only to see his off-stump take a walk. All of Bumrah's seven 5-wicket hauls have now come away from home.
GETTY IMAGES

'Pant'astic ton: Rishabh Pant was India's lone warrior with the bat in its second innings. In scoring a century in Cape Town, Pant became the only Indian keeper to have hundreds in England, Australia and South Africa. Pant now has four Test hundreds, the second-most for an Indian wicketkeeper, behind M. S. Dhoni's six centuries. Three of Pant's four hundreds have come outside India. Pant alone contributed 100 to India's total of 198. GETTY IMAGES

Monumental win: South Africa came back from 0-1 down to win the series 2-1. It chased down 212 to claim a seven-wicket victory on home soil. This was only the fourth time India lost a Test series after winning the first match. The Test wasn't without its share of controversy. India had been furious on day three when Dean Elgar had an lbw verdict overturned by the ball-tracking technology when on 22. The delivery from Ravichandran Ashwin was deemed to be bouncing over the top of the wicket, and the Indian players could be heard over the stump mics criticising the technology. GETTY IMAGES

Faltering in the Final Frontier

India could blame its batters, but the bowlers cannot escape responsibility for the defeat in South Africa. Given the conditions, at least one of the targets in the last two Tests should have been defended.

S. DINAKAR

Losing the plot: The flare-up over Dean Elgar winning a leg-before review in the South African second innings at Newlands was a needless show of temper by the Indians. REUTERS

The breeze blowing from the Table Mountain that sweeps across the Newlands ground carries with it several tales.

Stories of triumph, disappointment, tears, anger, and missed opportunities. These winds, which are a part of the cricketing landscape in these parts, are a witness to many narratives.

This time, too, they saw ecstasy on one side and agony on another.

Joy for South Africa and heartbreak for India. What a turnaround it was.

After India thumped South Africa in the first Test in Centurion, many spoke about a 3-0 sweep. India, they felt, was too strong for a transitional South African team.

South Africa coach Mark Boucher said: "After the first day of the opening Test, most people wrote us off."

In fact, most people jumped the gun. How easily they overlooked the Proteas can be resilient at home, still possessed a potent pace attack and if the side got its batting right, it could yet challenge India.

The batting pieces fell in place and the South African picture was complete. The Proteas emerged 2-1 winners in one of the greatest come-from-behind stories by a transitional team in modern cricket history.

And the series consumed Indian captain Virat Kohli, who relinquished his job just a day after the series setback at Newlands. The disappointment was galling.

A highly driven captain, who brought energy to the side apart from his highly-rated batting skills, and played Tests with

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great passion, called it a day as a skipper after a seven-year reign of some memorable conquests — Test series triumph over Australia in Australia — and a few heartbreaks.

The failure to defeat South Africa in South Africa in a Test series must go down as one of Kohli's biggest failures as a captain.

What went wrong for India? In fact, there were many factors that did not go right for Kohli's team.

The batting remained patchy throughout the series. India lost wickets in clusters. They did not put together enough partnerships.

K.L. Rahul made a fine hundred, playing and leaving in the first Test. He gradually tapered off after that with the clever South African seamers bowling closer to his off-stump and making him play those deliveries.

With the openers not firing after the first Test, the onus was on Cheteshwar Pujara at No. 3. The senior batter made an attacking half-century in the second Test but little else apart from that.

Ajinkya Rahane played a couple of fluent innings but could not kick on to a bigger score that a senior batter should.

And Kohli at No. 4 could not make an impression in the first Test, missed the second owing to a back spasm, and batted capably for his 79 in the first innings of the third Test but it was his dismissal in the second innings that opened the sluice gates for South Africa.

In the only opportunity he received, in the second Test, Hanuma Vihari, a sound player off his back-foot, made a fine impression in the cauldron.

The Proteas played with an attacking mindset. Despite losing the first Test principally because of ordinary batting, the host brought in an additional bowler, Duanne Olivier, when many wanted an additional batter.

Skipper Dean Elgar said, "The top six have to take responsibility." That was it.

And the Proteas pace attack tested the Indian batting. Kagiso Rabada, the highest wicket-taker in the series with 20, bowled with real pace and hostility.

Winning a Test is a lot about nailing the big moments and South Africa did that in the Indian second innings at the Wanderers.

Elgar is not just a gutsy batsman whose character rubs off on the rest of the team but also a very good motivator who riled up Rabada who was not bowling at his best until that point.

After the Elgar effect, Rabada bowled a hostile game-changing spell of blistering pace and fire, ending the threatening partnership between Pujara and Rahane and sending back Rishabh Pant after first striking the wicket-keeper batsman on the helmet grill.

Pant, also undone by a chatter by Rassie van der Dussen at short leg, went for a wild heave off the next delivery and was soon

Below par: The celebrated fast bowling pair of Jasprit Bumrah and Mohammed Shami bowled with incision only in patches. They bowled a fuller length and were driven. REUTERS

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CRICKET SOUTH AFRICA
CRICKET SOUTH AFRICA
CASTORE

Two for joy: South African batter Keegan Peterson, the Man of the Match in the final Test and also the Man of the Series, defied the Indian attack with his flair, footwork, and balance. Skipper Dean Elgar, too, batted and led aggressively.
GETTY IMAGES

walking back. The momentum had shifted towards South Africa. Not for nothing is Rabada a game-changer.

All three Tests were played on typical South African pitches with healthy pace and bounce, and seam movement.

The batsmen had to be patient, be judicious outside off, and put away deliveries lacking in length or line; back-foot play and horizontal bat shots are often the way to success on these surfaces.

The Indian batters, playing away from the body with minimal footwork, were gobbled up by the cordon. They also succumbed to the hook and the pull shot; the Proteas laid the trap.

South Africa's lanky left-armer Marco Jansen, making his debut in the series, finished with 19 scalps, just one behind Rabada.

He brought with him natural bounce, the left-armer's angle, the ability to bring the ball into the right-hander and bowl with rhythm and control from both over and round the wicket.

Jansen, just 21, was a complete package. And the Proteas had done their homework. The Indians have never really been comfortable against quality left-arm seamers.

The nippy Duanne Olivier struck some telling blows, settling into the side after returning to the team.

And Lungi Ngidi bowled a spell of great significance in the Indian second innings of the third Test when Kohli and Pant were threatening to shut the door on the South Africans.

Pant, spoken to by the team management after his misadventure in the second Test, blended attacking batting and responsible play with the ease of a natural, and Kohli — cutting down risks — was lending him dogged support.

Yet, Ngidi sent down delivery after delivery of controlled hostility, giving little away — such was his accuracy that finally Kohli wilted, going for a drive outside off and being taken in the cordon.

Ngidi dismissed R. Ashwin and Shardul Thakur and simply put, like Rabada's in the second Test, this too was a game-changing spell.

And to think that South Africa was without its quickest bowler Anrich Nortje in the series.

Eventually, Pant's tremendous hundred came in a losing cause. The southpaw has so much time to play when he applies his mind; the trick is in picking the length early.

Proteas' exceptional bowling was backed by outstanding fielding and catching. Keegan Petersen and van der Dussen were particularly outstanding. Elgar and Aiden Markram were smart in the slips.

On the other hand, India put down crucial catches. These lapses, many in the cordon, proved costly.

And the highly-rated Indian bowling, twice, failed to defend challenging 200-plus scores.

What went wrong with the attack that took 20 wickets in the first Test to hand India a convincing win?

A target of 240 on a Wanderers pitch of uneven bounce and seam movement was defendable but the Indian bowlers could not hit the widening cracks on a consistent basis. The lack of accuracy was appalling.

On the occasions they hit the cracks, they put the batters in considerable difficulty. In fact, Shardul Thakur hit the cracks in the first innings and sliced through the South African innings with seven wickets.

For South Africa, skipper Elgar took blows on the body, gloves, and helmet grill,

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Off the blocks: South Africa's lanky left-armer Marco Jansen, making his debut in the series, finished with 19 scalps, just one behind Rabada. AP

but never wilted. His unbeaten 96 when the Proteas successfully chased 240 was among the bravest innings you could witness.

The South African batting evolved as the series progressed. Even the out-of-form Markram kick-started the innings with a blaze of strokes during the chase at the Wanderers.

Petersen, a compact, technically correct batter with flair, footwork, and balance, grew in stature as the series progressed, defending solidly, and finding the gaps with a surgeon's precision.

van der Dussen, an organised batter with sound defence and judicious aggression, held one end up in both the successful chases.

And vice-captain Temba Bavuma essayed his shots on both sides of the wicket with power and placement.

Gradually, the South African batting line-up had a shape and appeared a solid structure.

The celebrated Jasprit Bumrah and Mohammed Shami bowled with incision only in patches. Their length too was not right on seaming tracks. They bowled a fuller length and were driven.

Just short of a good length is the right ploy to bowl on seaming tracks where you give the ball a chance to bounce and deviate.

Ashwin was at best restrictive. Thakur gave it his all but has his limitations. Sadly, for India, the impressive Mohammed Siraj picked up a hamstring injury in the second Test and Umesh Yadav looked short of match practice in the decider.

And the flare-up over Elgar winning a leg-before review in the South African second innings at Newlands was a needless show of temper by the Indians.

Kohli, Rahul, and Ashwin made sure that the stump mic picked their voice as they cast aspersions on the official broadcaster for the series *SuperSport*.

As Elgar pointed out, the incident enabled South Africa to get quick runs as the angry Indians lost focus.

On the final day of the series, the classy and compact Petersen made his way to 82 — he finished with 276 runs, the most by any batter from both teams in the series — and was adjudged Man of the Match and Player of the Series. A star was born.

Like at the Wanderers, India lost by a mile, seven wickets, at Newlands.

You could blame the batters, but the bowlers cannot escape responsibility for the defeat. Given the conditions, at least one of the targets in the last two Tests should have been defended.

In the end, the opportunity for a historic first Test series win in South Africa was gone with the wind. And the eternal Table Mountain was a witness as India blew its best-ever chance.

Cricket in paradise

Serene surroundings: The view from top is awesome; you get a panoramic view of Cape Town and its famous harbour. S. DINAKAR

S. DINAKAR

Newlands is among the great cricket venues in the world. From the ground, the sight of the Table Mountain can lift the spirit of the cricketers.

Cape Town brings with it freshness and freedom, even during times of Covid. The breeze from the limitless Atlantic Ocean is refreshing. The sight of the majestic Table Mountain is inspiring. The colours of the city are bright. People still flock to Camps Bay, a popular beach with bistros and bars that are always invariably full.

Cape Town has a character like all great cities of the world. The rare tango of mountains and coastline – they are seldom so close – add to the city's lustre. It's a bright place of sunshine and friendly folk. It is also among the safest cities in South Africa; the crime rate here is significantly lower than in the other parts.

For this writer, a trip to Table Mountain soothes the senses. It relaxes the mind, rejuvenates the body. The view from the top is awesome; you get a panoramic view of Cape Town and its famous harbour. And then people wait to see the beautiful sunset, in a blaze of orangish-red, over the ocean.

The restaurant atop the mountain – a cable car takes you up – serves you hot coffee. It's refreshing.

The Table Mountain also overlooks the Newlands cricket ground, creating a glorious backdrop to the arena.

Newlands is among the great cricket venues in the world. It's a lovely open ground with pretty little stands and a small hill.

From the ground, the sight of the Table Mountain can lift the spirit of the cricketers. With the series on a knife-edge at 1-1, both teams need all the mental edge they can gather.

Ahead of the Test hangs the big question? Will Virat Kohli play? Kohli pulled out of the second Test citing a back spasm and there are doubts about his match fitness.

Kohli, though, hits the ground running. He nails the practice sessions, addresses the pre-match media digital interaction, and declares himself fit for the decider.

And Kohli proceeds to win the spin of the coin. It's the third successive win at the toss for India in the series. Can this luck translate into a historic maiden Test series triumph for India in South Africa?

Meanwhile, there is a scare in the media box. One journalist tests positive for Covid. His identity is not revealed. Covid protocols in the media box are reinforced.

The cricket is engrossing. And it is a game of fortune swings. This is also Kagiso Rabada's 50th Test and the spearhead bowls with fire.

The game brings you into contact with interesting, colourful personalities. Among them is Ed Rainsford, a Zimbabwe seamer, who played 39 ODIs for his country between 2004 and 2010.

A role in the media gives former cricketers an opportunity to stay in touch with the game and Rainsford is part of a government-run South African channel broadcasting the game.

Rainsford, a friendly character, had visited India several times, featuring in the Duleep and Deodhar Trophies when the BCCI invited a Zimbabwe XI to play in these tournaments.

He speaks Hindi with quite the perfect accent and talks in Bengali too; after the India-South Africa series, he will be off to Bangladesh for the BPL Twenty20 tournament.

Rainsford tells us that the economy of Zimbabwe is improving, and things are gradually getting better in that picturesque country. It's welcome news.

The Test sees several key moments. Kohli holds his 100th Test catch, a tribute to his fitness and reflexes.

And Rishabh Pant, during an outstanding second innings hundred, bats with the ease of a natural and swats the pacemen around with the flair that only comes to the gifted,

The see-saw Test then explodes. This time the Indians' anger is at the DRS. Dean Elgar wins a review for leg-before, the bowler being R. Ashwin, and the Indian team sees red.

Elgar is rapped below the knee roll and the Indians are convinced the South African is out. Things go out of hand. Kohli, vice-captain K.L. Rahul and Ashwin make it a point to go near the stump mic and make comments that do not project *SuperSport*, the official broadcaster of the series, in good light. Kohli kicks the air in disgust, a case of a captain behaving badly.

The bigger question is can DRS be manipulated? The Indians certainly think so since there is a human element in the process.

Anyway, the Indians lose their cool and the plot. The South African meticulously whittle down the target of 212.

And on the fourth morning, the Indians put down catches and the Proteas coast to a seven-wicket win.

It's a tremendous triumph against the odds for South Africa. Coach Mark Boucher said, "A lot of people wrote us off after the first day of the first Test."

From there a transitional South Africa, led by Captain Courageous Dean Elgar, has come back to win the series. Along the way, the Proteas have found heroes, none more than the technically impressive and fluent Keegan Petersen and beanpole left-arm seamer Marco Jansen.

It's time for the South Africans to celebrate a believe-it-or-not series win. For the Indians, it's a gilt-edged opportunity missed against a Protea side rebuilding with several stars retired.

The Indians are unlikely to get such an opportunity again. The disappointment is pronounced.

The Test is over, and a bombshell arrives the next day. Virat Kohli quits as Test captain after seven years in the job. He was a highly driven captain who brought passion to the side, particularly in Test cricket. But he was also a control freak who rubbed some teammates the wrong way.

One era ends and another begins. The show must go on. ✪

Familiar face: Ed Rainsford played 39 ODIs for Zimbabwe between 2004 and 2010. Rainsford is part of a government-run South African channel broadcasting the game and speaks Hindi with quite the perfect accent and talks in Bengali too.

S. DINAKAR

Shardul in elite club

7

The number of wickets claimed by Shardul Thakur in South Africa's first innings of the second Test match in Johannesburg are now the best bowling figures by an Indian bowler in South Africa. (A) Thakur's figures are now the second-best figures by an Indian bowler on African soil after Irfan Pathan's 7/59 in Harare in 2005. Incidentally, Thakur's performance is now the joint-fourth best by any visiting bowler on South African soil and the joint-second best by any visiting pacer since WW1. (B) Also, his 7/61 is the fourth-best by an Indian paceman on foreign soil. (C) and overall, the seventh-best figures by an Indian paceman in Test cricket. It is also the-third best figures against South Africa. (D) and the third-best bowling by an Indian paceman. (E) — both in a losing cause.

Best innings bowling figures in each Test playing country for India (A)

Country	Best	Bowler	Venue	Month, Year	Result
India	10/74	Anil Kumble	Delhi	February 1999	W
New Zealand	8/76	Erapalli Prasanna	Auckland	January 1976	W
Pakistan	8/85	Kapil Dev	Lahore	January 1983	D
Australia	8/106	Kapil Dev	Adelaide	December 1985	D
Zimbabwe	7/59	Irfan Pathan	Harare	September 2005	W
South Africa	7/61	Shardul Thakur	Johannesburg	January 2022	L
England	7/74	Ishant Sharma	Lord's	July 2014	W
West Indies	7/83	R. Ashwin	North Sound	July 2016	W
Bangladesh	7/87	Zaheer Khan	Mirpur	January 2010	W
Sri Lanka	6/46	R. Ashwin	Galle	August 2015	L

Note:

***Kumble's figures were against Pakistan*

*** Prasanna is the only bowler to claim an eight or more wicket haul in New Zealand*

Best bowling by visiting bowlers in South Africa since WW1 (B)

Bowling	Bowler	For	Venue	Month, Year	Result
7/36	Johnny Wardle	England	Cape Town	January 1957	W
7/40	Clarrie Grimmett	Australia	Johannesburg (Old)	February 1936	W
7/46	Andrew Caddick	England	Durban	December 1999	D
7/61	Matthew Hoggard	England	Johannesburg (New)	January 2005	W
7/61	Shardul Thakur	India	Johannesburg (New)	January 2022	L

Note: *the last three mentioned bowlers are all pacemen*

Best bowling by an Indian paceman on foreign soil (C)

Bowling	Bowler	Against	Venue	Month, Year	Result
8/85	Kapil Dev	Pakistan	Lahore	January 1983	D
8/106	Kapil Dev	Australia	Adelaide	December 1985	D
7/59	Irfan Pathan	Zimbabwe	Harare	September 2005	W
7/61	Shardul Thakur	South Africa	Johannesburg (New)	January 2022	L
7/74	Ishant Sharma	England	Lord's	July 2014	W

Best bowling against South Africa in a lost cause (D)

Bowling	Bowler	For	Venue	Month, Year
8/61	Mitchell Johnson	Australia	Perth	December 2008
7/56	Shane Warne	Australia	Sydney	January 1994
7/61	Shardul Thakur	India	Johannesburg (New)	January 2022
7/84	Franklyn Rose	West Indies	Durban	December 1998
6/27	Shahadat Hossain	Bangladesh	Mirpur	February 2008

Best bowling by Indian pacemen in a lost cause (E)

Bowling	Bowler	Against	Venue	Month, Year
9/83	Kapil Dev	West Indies	Ahmedabad	November 1983
8/86	J. Srinath	Pakistan	Kolkata	February 1999
7/61	Shardul Thakur	South Africa	Johannesburg (New)	January 2022
8/86	Amar Singh	England	Chennai	February 1934
7/159	Dattu Phadkar	West Indies	Chennai	January 1949
7/220	Kapil Dev	Pakistan	Faisalabad	January 1983

7

The number of Test sides to successfully chase targets of 200+ against India. South Africa, by winning in Johannesburg and Cape Town has become the first side to do so this on three separate occasions, when no one (England, Australia, West Indies and New Zealand) else has done it more than once against India.

Highest successful run chases of 200-plus against India in Test cricket

Total	Overs	Target	Winning side	Venue	Achieved on date
342/8	116.2+	339	Australia	Perth	December 21, 1977
276/5	85.3	276	West Indies	Delhi	November 29, 1987
243/3	67.4	240	South Africa	Johannesburg (New)	January 6, 2022
215/6	60.3	213	New Zealand	Wellington	December 30, 1998
212/3	63.3	212	South Africa	Cape Town	January 14, 2022
211/5	64.1	211	South Africa	Cape Town	January 6, 2007
208/4	88.5	207	England	Delhi	December 25, 1972

+ converted to six ball overs. In the Perth Test Indian bowlers delivered 87.2 eight-ball overs.

10

The number of consecutive tosses won by India across all formats in international cricket, when it won the toss in the Cape Town Test match. This equals its best of maximum tosses it has won consecutively in international cricket. The last time India lost a toss in an international game was against Afghanistan in Abu Dhabi on Nov 3, 2021 in the T20 World Cup. Since then, the side has won 10 tosses in a row.

Consecutive toss wins across all formats for India

			FORMAT			RESULT		
Mts	From	To	Tests	ODIs	T20Is	Won	Lost	Drawn/NR
10	Jul 7, 1988	7 Oct 1988	1	9	0	4	6	0
10	Dec 18, 2013	26 Feb 2014	4	6	0	1	6	+3
10*	Nov 5, 2021	*Jan 11, 2022	5	0	5	7	2	1
8	Dec 8, 1991	Jan 14, 1992	2	6	0	2	5	1
8	Aug 27, 2016	Oct 23, 2016	3	3	2	5	2	1
7	Oct 29, 1983	Dec 10, 1983	4	3	0	0	5	2
7	Oct 21, 1988	Nov 12, 1988	1	6	0	4	3	0
7	Apr 12, 2006	May 23, 2006	0	7	0	3	4	0
7	Jul 27, 2007	Aug 30, 2007	2	5	0	3	3	1

** in progress   + also one tie*

1

The number of occasions when 20 batters from a side were dismissed 'caught' in a Test match. First time in Test cricket history a side (India) lost all its 20 wickets in a single Test match to catches! In the recent Cape Town Test 20 Indian batters were dismissed caught in both the innings of the match.

Most batters dismissed 'caught' from one side in a Test match

Catches	Batting side	Fielding side	Venue	Month, Year	Won by	The lone dismissal other than a catch
20	India	South Africa	Cape Town	January 2022	SA	–
19	England	Australia	Brisbane	Nov-Dec 1982	Aus	Bowled
19	Pakistan	Australia	Sydney	January 2010	Aus	LBW
19	India	South Africa	Durban	December 2010	Ind	Bowled
19	England	Australia	Brisbane	November 2013	Aus	Bowled
19	England	South Africa	Cape Town	January 2020	Eng	LBW

Note: *In a Test match at the MCG all 20 South African wickets fell to 18 catches and two stumpings against Australia in February 1932!*

All records are correct and updated until the end of the Cape Town Test on Jan 14, 2022

CONGRATULATIONS
BANGLADESH U/19
WINNERS OF THE
ICC UNDER19
CRICKET WORLD CUP
SOUTH AFRICA 2020
TOTAL 170
CHAMPIONS

PTI

ICC U-19 World Cup: Focus on India, Australia, Bangladesh

The ICC U-19 World Cup started in the Caribbean islands this fortnight. Bangladesh is the defending champion **(in pic)** after upsetting India in the last edition in South Africa before the pandemic struck in 2020.

The Asian nation can repeat the heroics under the leadership of Rakibul Hasan, who was part of Akbar Ali's victorious side two years ago as a 17-year-old. But then, it is a fresh start, and all eyes will be back on India and Australia.

Four-time champion India has exciting batters such as Harnoor Singh, Angkrish Raghuvanshi and skipper Yash Dhull. The fast bowling department has a good mix of pace and swing with Rajvardhan Hangargekar and Ravi Kumar. Spinners Vicky Ostwal and Kaushal Tambe look promising too. Australia will bank on the experience of captain Cooper Connolly who had played the earlier edition. He already blasted a ton and a fifty in the warm-up games. Chennai-born ambidextrous spinner Nivethan Radhakrishnan will be the X-factor for the three-time champion.

The tournament with 16 nations in four groups runs from January 14 to February 5.

Kiwis bounce back in Taylor's farewell series

World Test champion New Zealand lived up to its reputation in Christchurch this fortnight. It beat Bangladesh by an innings and 117 runs to draw the two-Test series 1-1 and ensure a perfect farewell for veteran Ross Taylor.

Driven by a double hundred (252) from stand-in captain Tom Latham, New Zealand ended its first innings at 521/6. Devon Conway scored his second hundred (109) of the series. Taylor managed only 28.

The Bangladesh batters looked ordinary against the New Zealand pacers. Trent Boult's five-for made the inroads as the touring party found itself in a mess — 126 all out — in the first innings.

Bangladesh had to bat again on the back of a huge deficit. Litton Das provided a bit of sunshine with his fluent 102 at a strike rate of 89.47, but he left it too late.

The Tigers folded for 278. And it was Taylor who picked up the last wicket, that of Ebadot Hossain, with his part-time off-spin.

AFP

Abid Ali begins rehab in Lahore

AFP

Pakistan batsman Abid Ali expects to return to international cricket soon. The 34-year-old, who was diagnosed with Acute Coronary Syndrome in December 2021, has started his rehabilitation at the National High Performance Centre in Lahore.

The cricketer had complained of chest pain while batting in the Quaid-e-Azam Trophy. He had no idea about a heart ailment and had to undergo angioplasty to recover.

"I was not aware that I was having a heart issue. The doctors conducted ECG (electrocardiogram), which did not come out fine. They asked me how I was even walking and told me, 'A normal person's heart operates at 55 per cent, while yours was operating at 30 per cent. A valve of your heart is blocked and we will have to insert two stents.'

"That left me in shock," Abid was quoted as saying by *PCB Digital*.

The Board's medical team has designed a rehabilitation plan for Abid. "Cricket is a priceless aspect of my life that I do not want to leave. I am trying to return to cricket as soon as I can. I am hopeful that I will make my comeback in this new life that the Almighty has given me."

Rajapaksa out of retirement in 10 days

Ten days after announcing retirement from international cricket, Sri Lanka batsman Bhanuka Rajapaksa has withdrawn his resignation.

The 30-year-old left-hander, who had taken the call due to familial obligations, had a change of heart after meeting Sri Lanka Sports Minister Namal Rajapaksa. "Pursuant to a meeting with the Hon. Namal Rajapaksa — Minister of Youth & Sports and after consulting with the national selectors, Bhanuka Rajapaksa has notified SLC that he wishes to withdraw his resignation which he tendered to SLC on 3rd Jan. 2022, with immediate effect.

"In his letter to SLC withdrawing his resignation, he further states that he wishes to represent his country in the game he loves for the years to come," said a media release from SLC.

In his resignation letter, Rajapaksa had highlighted the reasons behind his decision: "I have very carefully considered my position as a player, husband and am taking this decision looking forward to fatherhood and associated familial obligations," he had written.

AP

Rajapaksa has featured in 18 T20Is and five ODIs. He was part of Sri Lanka's T20 World Cup 2021 squad.

Wriddhaayan Bhattacharyya

Run-glut on return: Usman Khawaja's back-to-back comeback centuries at the SCG Test put Australia in a commanding position. Playing his first Test in more than two years after he was dropped during the 2019 Ashes, Khawaja became one of nine batters to score hundreds in both innings of an Ashes Test. The last to achieve the feat was his teammate, Steve Smith, in 2019, in Birmingham. "I am enjoying the game. Lots of ups and downs. I can go out there and get two ducks in the next game. That's how it is. A hard game," Khawaja said after being adjudged Player of the Match. GETTY IMAGES

The Broadway show: Stuart Broad provided a lone silver lining for England with the ball in the first innings in Sydney, in which he became the third oldest seamer, after Glenn McGrath and Richard Hadlee, to take a five-wicket haul in Australia in the past 70 years. Broad claimed 5 for 101, including the wicket of centurion Usman Khawaja and a dangerous-looking Steve Smith. Broad's five-wicket haul was his eighth in Ashes cricket and the 19th of his Test career. "I think when you haven't been playing, particularly at 35 years old, you realise how special it is. I've had points in my career where I've felt like I've always been playing. That's not happened in 2021 and it's my job to make that happen in 2022," Broad said. GETTY IMAGES

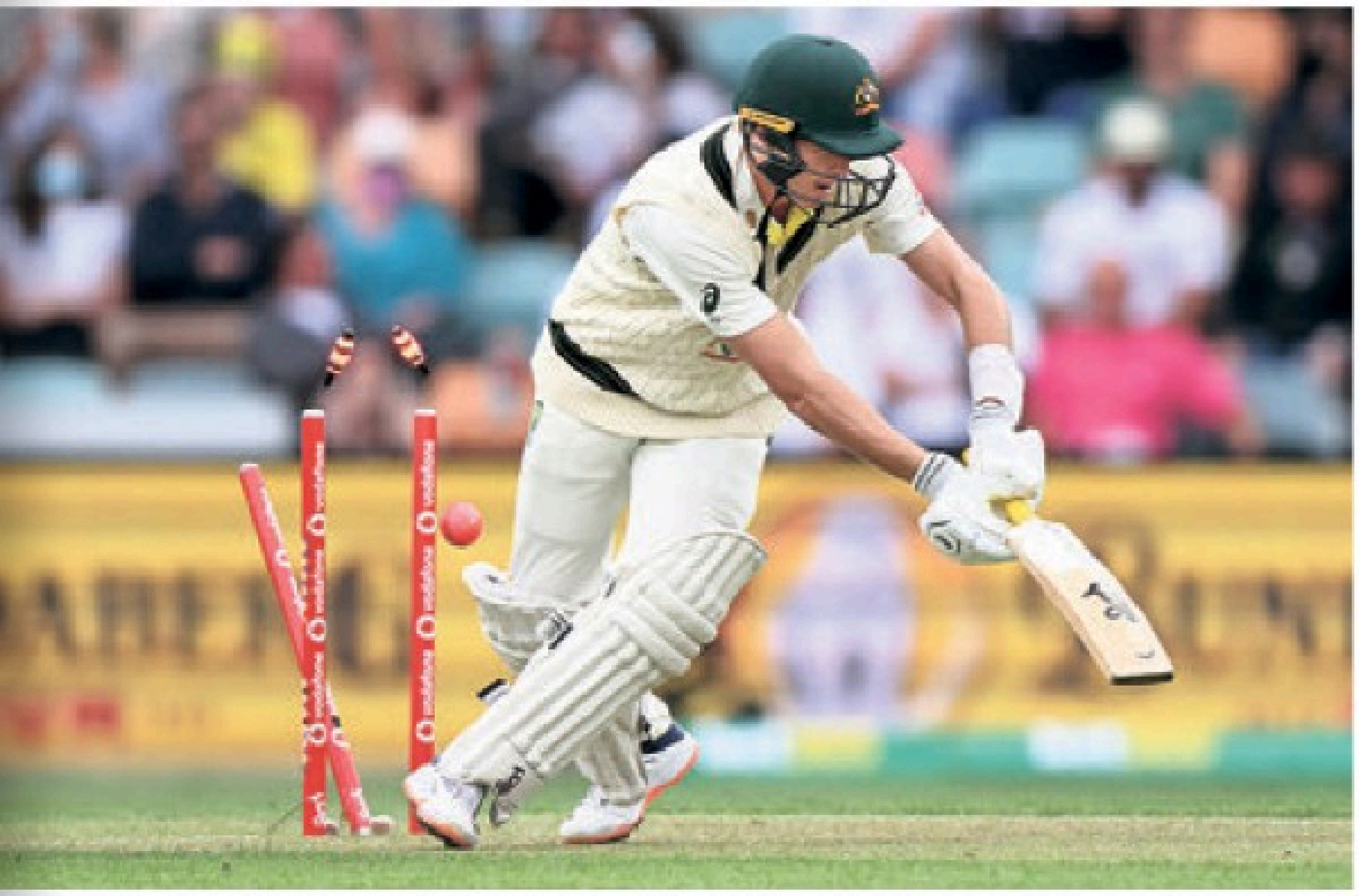
Resilient riposte: Jonny Bairstow scored a gutsy century as England's middle-order showed spine and smarts to recover from a precarious 4 for 36 in its first innings. Bairstow reached the landmark with a boundary off Pat Cummins; it was England's first century of this Ashes tour. Bairstow's 158-ball 113 comprised eight fours and three sixes. What made the ton more special was that Bairstow required strapping and medical attention during the course of his innings, following a nasty blow to the right thumb from Cummins. GETTY IMAGES

Save your feet!: Cummins trapped Jos Buttler lbw on review before doing the same to Mark Wood (in the picture) two balls later with a delivery that knocked the bowler off his feet. Cummins had blown hot and cold with the ball until that over. GETTY IMAGES

On the money: With just two overs left in the match, Steve Smith picked up his first Test wicket since 2016 to put Australia on the cusp of a 4-0 scoreline. The leggie tossed up one into the footmarks, but the ball went straight after pitching and kissed the outside edge of Jack Leach's bat before going straight into the hands of David Warner at slip. GETTY IMAGES

KHAWAJA
1
CAREY
4
31

Last-over heroics: England's last pair of Stuart Broad and James Anderson needed to survive 12 balls to salvage a draw. After Broad saw out Nathan Lyon's last over, Smith had six balls to get England's No. 11, Anderson, out. The veteran seamer blocked all six balls successfully to end Australia's whitewash dreams. "Five balls from Steve Smith, he landed them really well, but the sixth – I don't think Steve would begrudge me using the word 'pie'," Anderson quipped On the Tailenders podcast after the hard-fought draw. "When I shook his hand I said 'what was that?' He said 'the pressure got to me'." GETTY IMAGES



In a tangle: After the home side was reduced to 12 for 3, Marnus Labuschagne counter-attacked for 44 in a stand of 71 with Travis Head after being dropped on nought by Zak Crawley. Australia's No. 3 was bowled round his legs by Stuart Broad in a bizarre fashion. Broad went full and straight and Labuschagne got into a tangle, slipping over as he lost his leg stump! GETTY IMAGES

Making heads turn: Travis Head hit a swashbuckling hundred on day one of the fifth Ashes Test in Hobart to put Australia back in the driver's seat. Head, who missed the fourth Test due to COVID-19, made his second century of the series off 112 deliveries. He was dismissed next ball for 101. Head, who struck 12 fours during his enterprising innings, told *ABC Radio*: "We were going to be ultra-positive with whatever scoring we could get and tried to enjoy it." GETTY IMAGES

Lone silver lining: Mark Wood took a career-best 6-37 as Australia was rolled over for 155 in the third innings. This was Wood's maiden Ashes five-wicket haul. The last time an England bowler had better figures in a Test in Australia than Wood's was in December 2006 when Matthew Hoggard took 7-109 in Adelaide. GETTY IMAGES

UpRooted: Joe Root's series got over without a hundred in Australia after a Scott Boland delivery shot through low and crashed into the bottom of the stumps, slipping the toe-end of Root's bat. GETTY IMAGES

Leading from front: England suffered a humiliating fourth-innings collapse under the lights at Bellerive Oval on the third evening, losing 10 for 56 in pursuit of 271. The final nail in the coffin was Australia Test captain Pat Cummins' dismissal of Ollie Robinson – an overpitched yorker that crashed into the base of off stump. Cummins has now been the leading wicket-taker in every Ashes series he has played (2017/18, 2019, and 2021/22). GETTY IMAGES

'Urn'ing victory: Australia won the fifth Test by 146 runs, and bagged the Ashes series 4-0. Australia has now won all the 10 day-night Tests it has played thus far. The crushing defeat in Hobart was the 10th Ashes Test lost by Joe Root as a captain. Australia and England return to Test action against Pakistan and the West Indies respectively, in March. GETTY IMAGES

ON THE WRITE LINE

SUNIL GAVASKAR

MPL
BYJU'S
SHARDUL
54

The long wait isn't over yet

Sportstar Print Edition, February 5, 2022

This was perhaps the weakest South African team with an inexperienced batting line-up and a bowling attack that was handicapped by the absence of Anrich Nortje.

Lost chance: Indian captain Virat Kohli congratulates Rassie van Der Dussen after South Africa beat India 2-1 in the Test series. AP

India lost a golden opportunity to complete the circle of winning a Test series in all the Test playing countries when it went down to South Africa recently. This was perhaps the weakest South African team with an inexperienced batting line-up and a bowling attack that was handicapped by the absence of Anrich Nortje. Yes, the pitches had something in them for the bowlers every day, but they were by no means difficult to score as was shown by the South African batsmen in the two wins they secured batting fourth, losing only three wickets each time in achieving the target.

The old saying that to win a game a team needs to take 20 wickets is only true if the batting side scores runs. India's wins in Australia last year came on the back of solid batting performances that gave the bowlers enough runs to keep fielders in wicket taking positions rather than run saving ones.

The Indian middle order's ordinary run of form was seen once again as there were just three scores over 50 by the experienced batsmen. It meant that with Rishabh Pant batting at No. 6, the pressure was on him and R. Ashwin to hold up the batting. Pant played a superlative knock in the second innings of the final Test where he scored 100 out of the 140 runs made after he came in to bat. That wasn't enough to get India to a total that it could defend even though the bowlers tried their best. The part hard to swallow was the way India came after lunch when there were still 41 runs needed and gave up without a fight. It would have been good to see a fight till the end as we saw in the earlier Test at the Wanderers ground in Johannesburg. However, there was no Bumrah, no Shami the two most potent Indian bowlers, nor even Shardul Thakur, who has the knack of picking wickets and breaking

Troubled times: Novak Djokovic leaves a government detention facility before attending a court hearing at his lawyer's office in Melbourne, Australia. The controversy surrounding the world No. 1 has done no good to tennis. AP

partnerships.

Even as India lost at the beautiful Newlands cricket ground in picturesque Cape Town, the final Test in the Ashes series between England and Australia in Hobart saw 17 wickets fall on day two of the day-night pink-ball Test. The pitch was so grassy that it would have been difficult to distinguish it from the rest of the outfield. Granted that the pink ball swings far more especially when the lights are switched on, the question is whether the pitch would be criticised like the ones in the sub-continent if a similar number of wickets were to fall in a day. If that happened then all hell would break loose. It's quite amazing how a pitch where the ball turns but is not dangerous for batsmen is invariably criticised, but not a grassy pitch where the ball flies around the batsman's helmet.

It's pretty similar to judging batsmen only by how they play on fast, bouncy pitches but not on pitches where the ball is turning. To face fast bowling, a batsman has to either go forward or play off the back foot, while to play spin, apart from the above, the feet have to be used to go down the pitch to try and smother the turn or go deep in the crease to counter the spin.

Speaking of spin, the turn of the visa controversy with Novak Djokovic's entry into Australia did no good to the game of tennis nor to Australia. Firstly, why was a visa given to the world No. 1 if he was going to be stopped at the entry point on arrival. Secondly, why have a court hearing if the concerned minister had the power to overrule the court. He could have said earlier that whatever the court ruling, he was going to exercise his powers to send Djokovic back.

Djokovic also did not win any admirers when it was revealed that despite having Covid he had attended functions where there were other people, especially unvaccinated youngsters. That the accuracy of his declaration on his visa application forms about his travel prior to Australia was far from correct can be blamed on his management staff, but not his mingling with people despite having the virus the world has come to dread.

The last few days have seen some great sporting action, but also some pretty disappointing behaviour from icons on and off the sporting arena.

Debutant Natarajan recalls Brisbane thriller

"I have never been part of such a thrilling chase even in first-class cricket. It was an unbelievable experience," recalls T. Natarajan, one of the heroes of India's historic win over Australia in Brisbane.

S. DIPAK RAGAV

Prized scalp: T. Natarajan, playing his first Test match, picked the key wicket of centurion Marnus Labuschagne to bring India back into the game. GETTY IMAGES

T. Natarajan, India's 300th Test cricketer, would be forever part of the cricketing folklore for his role in a depleted India's historic victory over Australia in the Brisbane Test in January 2021.

A series of injuries had ruled most of the top players out of the decider and India took the field without R. Ashwin, Jasprit Bumrah, Hanuma Vihari, Umesh Yadav, Ravindra Jadeja, and Mohammed Shami. A second-string visiting team (or you can call it a third), however, defied the odds to script a nerve-wracking three-wicket win over Australia in the series decider, while chasing a total of 328 to win its second consecutive series Down Under.

The bowling attack had an inexperienced look with Mohammed Siraj, playing in only his third Test, leading the charge with Shardul Thakur and Navdeep Saini. While the two were playing their second Test match, Natarajan was one of the two

The fulcrum: Rishabh Pant's unbeaten 89 took India past the target of 328 to secure the improbable win.
GETTY IMAGES

debutants in the squad.

Ahead of the first anniversary of the historic win, *Sportstar* caught up with Natarajan, who initially travelled to Australia as a net bowler, but ended up playing a crucial role in the victory.

"It was a dream to play for India but it was unimaginable that I'll make my debut across all formats," says the 30-year-old to *Sportstar*. "When we went to Australia, I thought maybe I may play the T20s, but I made my debut in the third one-day before the T20s."

During the white-ball leg of the tour, Natarajan was informed that he would stay back for the Test series as a net bowler. As the only left-arm seamer in the squad, he had a huge role to play in the nets as the Indian team prepared to face Mitchell Starc.

However, he was added to the squad ahead of the third Test in Sydney as India battled with a slew of injuries. Valiant knocks from Ashwin and Vihari helped India save the Sydney Test, setting up the decider in Brisbane.

"But even then, I did not think I had a chance to play because there were other senior players like Shardul Thakur in the side," Natarajan says.

With a short turn-around time between the Sydney and Brisbane Test matches, Natarajan went about his business during the optional training session despite struggling with a left knee flare-up.

On the morning of the matchday, Bumrah had a niggle, and Natarajan was told hours before the toss that he would make his Test debut. "I could not believe it when I was told I would play. I was excited but also extremely nervous," Natarajan recalls.

A moment of joy: Team India celebrates the historic win in Brisbane.
GETTY IMAGES

“For the first two overs, I was a bit nervous and sprayed a bit here and there. (Captain Ajinkya) Rahane then spoke and calmed me down. After that, I was able to bowl a consistent line and keep things tight. I could have been better prepared mentally if I knew about my debut earlier.”

The left-arm pacer from Salem also had issues with no-balls in the first innings. “I struggled especially when bowling over the wicket, as there was a bit of slope at one end. Once I came around the wicket, I was able to get into my rhythm,” he says

In the second session, Natarajan removed Matthew Wade and centurion Marnus Labuschagne to bring India back into the game. On both occasions, the extra bounce he generated got the top edges of the batters while going for the pull.

“I could have had Labuschagne earlier, but an edge dropped just in front of first slip. But I felt really good after getting those two crucial wickets.”

He eventually picked three wickets in the first innings and was a bit unlucky not to get any in the second despite bowling well.

The most nervous moment of the match for him, though, was with the bat in the first innings. “I had to face one over from Starc and every delivery was close to 150 kph. The whole team was nervous and praying that I should come back without any injury. They were so happy and relieved when I came back, not out. I barely could see the first two deliveries,” recalls Natarajan.

Speaking about the fourth-innings chase, he adds: “The way Pujara, (Shubman) Gill and then Washi (Washington Sundar) played, I was confident we will get there easily. (Rishabh) Pant played a gutsy knock and I have never been part of such a thrilling chase even in first-class cricket. It was an unbelievable experience — a thriller for the ages.”

Still reliving those glorious days, Natarajan says: “For the first three or four months it felt like a dream that I played in all three formats. To win a Test series abroad in Australia is always special and that too in my first match. But at that time, I did not realise the enormity of the occasion. Only when I came back and saw the support I received at home, I understood how big a deal it was.”

POSTER

Keeping ego aside and bowling for the team

The 25-year-old left-arm finger-spinner has played a stellar role in Tamil Nadu becoming the most dominant force in white-ball cricket in the past three domestic seasons.

Thinking hat: "There will be some learnings from each tournament, so I modify my approach based on that. When it comes to physical and tactical preparation, I adopt a tournament-centric method," says Tamil Nadu spinner R. Sai Kishore.

VIJAY SONEJI

AYAN ACHARYA

Tamil Nadu's R Sai Kishore has consistently been among the most economical bowlers in domestic T20 cricket. In the 2019-20 Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy, Sai Kishore had an economy rate of 4.63 — the best among bowlers with at least 20 overs under their belt. In the 2020-21 edition, he had an economy rate of 4.82 — the second-best with the same cut-off. The 25-year-old left-arm finger-spinner has played a stellar role in Tamil Nadu becoming the most dominant force in white-ball cricket in the past three domestic seasons.

In this interview with *Sportstar,* Sai Kishore talks about his recent success in limited-overs cricket, the IPL, and working to get better at his craft.

Let's begin by talking about how you prepare for a season? When does the physical prep work start?

What I try to do, not just for a season because there's hardly any off-season — so, every tournament that I play, I usually analyse what worked and what didn't and the areas where I can get better. There will be some learnings from each tournament, so I modify my approach based on that. When it comes to physical and tactical preparation, I adopt a tournament-centric method.

When you are constantly travelling, working under a personal trainer is hard. So, I work with my Tamil Nadu strength and conditioning coach Arun K.R. He is very good. When I have a proper off-season, I work with Ramji Srinivasan (the former India fitness trainer). That takes care of the fitness part.

But my main focus is skill training. Once I get to the venue of the match, there are usually two days of nets. Conditions around

A tight leash: In the 2019-20 Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy, Sai Kishore had an economy rate of 4.63 – the best among bowlers with at least 20 overs under their belt.
VIJAY SONEJI

the country vary, and so do the pitches. As domestic cricketers, we play at the main grounds as well as at the lesser-known venues, so we have a good understanding of how the wickets behave. There are different kinds of soils in various parts of the country, and each behaves in its peculiar manner. As a spinner, I try to judge what length and speed to bowl. For example, the pitches made of red soil tend to break quicker than the black soil, so I bowl a bit fuller. On black-soil wickets, the length is shorter. I've been blessed to have a very defined support system around me in the last three-four years. It has helped me exploit all these nuances in the best possible way.

As far as tactical preparation goes, are you someone who watches a lot of player videos before a season/match?

I do like watching videos. However, in domestic cricket, you don't get a lot of videos because many of these matches aren't shown live. I watch the videos of all our opponent matches that are live, ball by ball. I don't leave anything uncovered. For me, though, watching a video is about putting myself in the game, reading the pitch and coming up with an action plan if I find myself in a similar situation. It isn't just about the batter or how he is playing a particular kind of bowler or bowling.

Can you recall any example of how you read a batter and a passage of game?

I think we played a Syed Mushtaq Ali T20 semifinal against Rajasthan last season. They were going at nearly 10 runs an over at one stage, so from there, we restricted them to 145 [154/9]. It was a good learning curve. Just keeping the ego aside and bowling for the team worked for me. The ego I am talking about is that in that stage of a T20 game, I will keep telling myself that I'm defending now, so I will have to concede a single here, a two there. It hurts sometimes because deep within I know I shouldn't be conceding that run. But that's the job my captain wants me to do. Speaking about the phases, I would be happy to go for extra 15-20 runs in search of that extra wicket...There were games where I ended up conceding 30-plus in four overs, but I was okay with it because, at that stage, we needed a wicket, and the breakthrough I provided would've stemmed the flow of runs.

Usually, I prepare a lot before a game. But once I enter the field, my mind is blank. Sometimes, you watch videos and devise a plan of action that suits a particular passage of play. However, once the game begins, you may or may not encounter that same situation — maybe the opposition is 30 for three, and the batter is looking to play you out. If the team needs wickets, I try to attack as much as possible without being selfish, and if the team needs me to bowl a six or seven-run over without conceding boundary, then I do that.

You have taken the new ball in T20 cricket and have also bowled at the death for Tamil Nadu. How have you adapted to these roles?

My *funda* is simple: As a bowler, I can't choose a phase of the game to bowl. I should be able to bowl upfront, in the middle and at the death. Especially in domestic cricket, where you don't usually have the luxury of playing too many all-rounders, as a spinner, you should be able to bowl any time. This year, Nattu (T. Natarajan) was in and out of the team with injury. So, we needed a death-bowling option... but that would've meant losing an all-rounder, so I took up that role. I've done that [bowling with the old ball] in TNPL (Tamil Nadu Premier League) as well, and Jaggi (N. Jagadeesan) and Vijay (Shankar) were confident in my ability to deliver at the death.

You've honed your skills as a batter as well. More recently, you helped Tamil Nadu get over the line in a last-ball finish

against Saurashtra in the Vijay Hazare Trophy semifinal. Tell us a bit about that innings.

In that game, Washy [Washington Sundar] was batting really well. He got out off the third ball of the second-last over. At that stage, we needed two boundaries to win. In my mind, I was visualising one boundary and ways to score that. We were under pressure, so the idea was to take it deep, say the last three or four balls, and put the pressure back on them. It just so happened that the field was up for the last ball and I was able to hit the ball through point for four. As far as batting goes, I talk to people who've done it day in and day out. I talk to Dinesh Karthik, watch Shahrukh Khan and Mohammed play.

Speaking of Dinesh Karthik, he has had a massive influence on the team, hasn't he?

Totally. Dinesh Karthik playing domestic cricket has helped us youngsters and the Tamil Nadu team immensely. We respect him a lot. With him on the side, we are all on the same page. There's no one drifting away. If someone as seasoned as DK is so into the game, we are not going to fool around. He provided role clarity, confidence and security during his two seasons as captain. Under him, we played the same team for almost all tournaments, which helped the players bond as a unit.

Is there anyone in the team or the Tamil Nadu support staff you turn to when you aren't feeling too confident about your game?

I speak to our assistant coach R. Prasanna whenever I am in doubt. He has been one of the driving forces behind our team's white-ball transformation, but he has been very silent about it. He watches a lot of videos. He has probably watched each ball faced by every opposition batter. So, if I miss something, I ask him what I should do against a particular batter, whether I should attack or defend, and he has the answers. He has been a big brother to us more than a coach, if you ask Shahrukh, he will tell you the same thing.

Did the IPL stint with the Chennai Super Kings make you a more rounded white-ball bowler?

Absolutely. I am not like Rashid Khan or Sunil Narine, who can deviate the ball both ways. I need to rely on my instincts and match awareness. So, being around someone like Mahi *bhai* [M. S. Dhoni]... you know, just talking to him and getting a feel of how he operates during a match has helped me develop my cricket. Even though I didn't play a single IPL game, these learnings will go a long way in making me a better cricketer. I observe each bowler closely, trying to figure out what makes the world-class spinners click on different wickets. I watch their videos and learn.

The IPL auction is scheduled for February 12 and 13. There are two new teams this time. What are your expectations?

As far as the auction goes, whether I get a good deal or go unsold doesn't change my mindset. I don't think the auction is a report card on how good or not good a player is. It's just the situation that prompts a franchise to sign one player and ignore the other. I am clear on my strengths and the areas I need to improve on. It's a boon that I've been able to make a career out of what I enjoy doing most: play cricket. There's joy in preparing for a match, getting better and giving 100 per cent for your team, both on and off the field. So yeah, we will just wait and see which way the auction goes.

Spirit of learning: Sai Kishore (right) didn't play a single IPL game, but he says, "These learnings will go a long way in making me a better cricketer. I observe each bowler closely, trying to figure out what makes the world-class spinners click on different wickets. I watch their videos and learn."

K. PICHUMANI

VIJAY HAZARE TROPHY

Perseverance pays off: "The Himachal Pradesh players are on cloud nine after winning the Vijay Hazare Trophy. "I was confident that Himachal had the strength to make an impact. We have worked hard to be counted among the best teams in the country," says Himachal coach Anuj Pal Dass (right).

SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

A just reward for years of hard work

"We are now confident of beating any team on the circuit," avers Himachal Pradesh captain Rishi Dhawan. This confidence is the best reward for HP that has finally won a tournament – the Vijay Hazare Trophy – in its 37th year in the first-class circuit.

VIJAY LOKAPALLY

Anurag Thakur set some lofty targets when he took over the reins of the Himachal Pradesh Cricket Association in 2000. "I will change the cricket scenario in the state," he had told this writer in early 2005 when HPCA hosted the North Zone one-day league.

The stadium in Dharamsala was a season old and it was already making waves as one of the most scenic cricket venues in the world. The stadium was a dream which Thakur had crafted on a piece of rocky land. He was criticised for taking up the project. "I will prove them wrong," was his resolve. And he did prove his critics wrong by investing in a stadium that now showcases the state's progress in cricket.

September 13, 1985 was a momentous day for cricket in Himachal. The state made its first-class debut with a Ranji Trophy match against Jammu and Kashmir in Srinagar. "We were so thrilled," recalls Praveen Sen, who played for HP in its inaugural first-class season. "We lost the first match but there was a sense of pride in qualifying to play Ranji Trophy. For us, it was akin to playing Test cricket," says Sen.

The main challenge, according to Sen, was a lack of facilities. "We had the talent but not the infrastructure for the game to blossom. I remember playing those affiliation matches in Mandi and Sujanpur. We fielded a team against the North Zone (under-22) team led by Navjot Singh Sidhu. We did well to earn the right to play first-class cricket," says Sen, who played his last match in 1990.

To compete with the best in the zone, Himachal Pradesh realised that it had to improve the basic infrastructure in the state. The plans were laid out and the HPCA identified Bilaspur, Nadaun and Dharamsala as the venues to add to Mandi and Una. "Those were the most exciting times for cricket in HP," remembers Sen.

The 2004-05 season saw HPCA emerge

as a wonderful host. Matches were played at small venues amidst stunningly natural environs. "You have to play at such venues to make the most of the natural playing conditions," Delhi coach Madan Lal had remarked. The pitches were challenging and with time the stadium in Dharamsala, thanks to curator Sunil Chauhan, produced a surface that was loved by the bowlers for the bounce it offered. "I believe in a fair contest," was Chauhan's argument for crafting pitches that asked questions of the batting techniques of the best.

The HPCA Centre of Excellence, a brainchild of Thakur and former India opener Vikram Rathour, was a game-changer for the youngsters in the state. It offered state of the art training facilities, hosted BCCI zonal camps, and came up with a quality indoor training hall. "It was our dream to give the best to the homegrown talent,' Rathour had said during the launch of the Centre.

Once the facilities were organised, HPCA looked to encourage young talent and the responsibility was entrusted to Anuj Pal Dass, a qualified coach, and a first-class cricketer. "I was confident that Himachal had the strength to make an impact. We have worked hard to be counted among the best teams in the country," said Dass, who has now coached the team to its first-ever cricket title — the Vijay Hazare Trophy.

"It's been a long journey with a collective effort from the team. It started with Anurag Thakur providing us with the best of facilities and the title this year is just the reward for all the hard work the players have put in. It is such a change from the time when I played. There was not a single turf pitch for us. Turf pitch was a luxury but gradually we were given the infrastructure to improve, and we grabbed the opportunities," says Dass.

According to Dass, the state has identified 70 sub-centres for spotting talent. "Being a hilly state, travelling becomes a great constraint. Now we have 44 out of the 70 places identified to promote talent. These are like coaching academies with cement pitches at most places," adds Dass. The efforts of the last 10 years have yielded results with a bunch of confident players now raising their standards to match those from established backgrounds.

"Trust has come to be accepted as an integral part of the preparation," says Dass. "The parameters have been restructured. We set small targets with a challenging flow chart where the players are confronted with varying equations. It worked splendidly this season. We organised exposure tours for the team. Hosted some strong teams. Our players don't get nervous on seeing strong teams."

Leading from the front: The Vijay Hazare triumph was led by Rishi Dhawan, who enjoyed a terrific season with the bat and the ball. N. SUDARSHAN

The Vijay Hazare triumph was led by

Dream venue: The Dharamsala Stadium is one of the most scenic cricket venues in the world. The stadium was a dream which then HPCA president Anurag Thakur had crafted on a piece of rocky land. THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

Rishi Dhawan, who enjoyed a terrific season with the bat and the ball, making stellar contributions at critical stages. "I can say this is the best phase of cricket in Himachal. The title win has come as a great boost. For a long time, we had been making it to the knockout stages, but this was our first final and we played like champions," says Dhawan, who began his association with the state team as an under-15 player in 2004, growing to play three ODIs and one T20I for India.

"We had been beating strong teams but somehow the big break was not coming through. We backed ourselves and each player took on the responsibility to chip in at the right time. We have come a long way from struggling for grounds to play on to a world-class stadium in the state. Today we have seven grounds where we can play first-class cricket," says Dhawan.

Reflecting on the journey, Dhawan gave credit to the HPCA. "The credit should largely go to Anurag sir. He had faith in our abilities. He sowed the seeds for us to believe in ourselves. We gave our best knowing the significance of how much we can achieve collectively. The bonding the team boasts of is the greatest quality we have," he says.

The turning point for the season was the match against Andhra in Mumbai. HP lost the match but gained the confidence to look ahead. "It was a critical match for us. We were chasing 323 and recovered to reach 292 from a desperate 141 for five. We learnt a lot from that defeat. The match convinced us that we had the strength to go all the way," says Dhawan.

The victories against Uttar Pradesh (quarterfinal) and Services (semifinal) set up the grand contest against a strong Tamil Nadu. "For me, winning the semifinal was emotional. I remember Amit Kumar coming and hugging me. We had waited for a long time to make a final," says Dhawan.

The best was reserved for the final. Tamil Nadu presented a stiff target of 315. "We allowed them to recover from 40 for four," recalls Dhawan. TN was rescued by a 202-run partnership between Dinesh Karthik (116) and Baba Indrajith (80). The counter for HP came from a sensational knock by opener Shubham Arora (136 not out), Amit Kumar (74) and Dhawan (42 not out). HP was 299 for four in 47.3 overs. According to the VJD method, it needed 289 to win when the match was stopped due to light.

"We are now confident of beating any team on the circuit," avers Dhawan. This confidence is the best reward for the team has finally won a tournament in its 37th year in the first-class circuit.

Shockwaves: Akash stunned Rio Olympics silver medallist Yoel Finol Rivas of Venezuela in the World Championship quarterfinals. "I enjoyed the bout and boxed according to a strategy. He was a very good boxer and an Olympic medallist, but I dominated him with my attacks in the first round," Akash says.
SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

To Mom, with love

"I am happy that I won the medal for the country but at the same time, I am sad because if I could have shown this to her and put it around her neck, she would have been very happy and proud," says world championship bronze medallist Akash Kumar.

Y. B. SARANGI

Akash Kumar became the seventh Indian male boxer to land a bronze medal at the World Championships when he won the bronze medal in the 54kg category in Belgrade in October. The 21-year-old, now, has set his eyes on fulfilling his departed mother's dream of winning an Olympic medal.

Akash — the fourth man from Haryana's boxing nursery of Bhiwani to bag a World championships medal — spoke to *Sportstar* about his journey so far and his plans.

You went through a lot of ups and downs in the lead-up to the World boxing championships. You lost your mother, became the National champion, and then went on to get the World Championships bronze medal. How do you look back at the phase of your life?

The last few months were both good and

Support system: Akash with (from left) High performance director Santiago Nieva, chief coach Narendra Rana and assistant coach Devendro Singh. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

bad. I lost my mother during the National championships. I cannot believe that she is not there with me anymore and I have won the (Worlds) medal because of her blessings. I am happy that I won the medal for the country but at the same time, I am sad because if I could have shown this to her and put it around her neck, she would have been very happy and proud. I tried to fulfill her dream. Her dream was to see me as an Olympic medallist and I will try my best to fulfill it.

Has this personal tragedy made you mentally tougher?
I have become mentally stronger after losing my mother. She always told me that whether I get good results or not, I must focus on my game and try to win medals for the country. 'You do your best, rest is in the hands of God,' was her advice. That's why I just focus on my training.

You have worked with the Services coaches, including chief coach Narendra Rana. Did that help you in the World championships?
It helped a lot as the same coaches were your coaches at an international event. They know your game, your attack, defence and technique. I try to learn from all the coaches. They know everything about you. Every coach teaches you something new.

Which was the toughest bout for you at the World championships?

The toughest was the quarterfinal bout (versus Yoel Finol Rivas of Venezuela). But I enjoyed the bout and boxed according to a strategy.

He is a very good boxer and an Olympic medallist, but I dominated him with my attacks in the first round. The pressure was there but coaches had said, 'If you trust yourself and win the first round, then you will do well. Have confidence.'

How was the night after you won the medal? Were you emotional?
I was very emotional, I could not sleep. I was thinking about winning gold, my next bout and, other things.

Who is your go-to man for personal and professional issues?
I speak to my *tauji* (Bhawar Singh) for personal and professional needs. If I become sad sometimes I also speak to (my first coach) Sanjay (Sheoran) Sir about my game.

You have spent a lot of time in the Army. How much of the Army's discipline has helped you as a boxer?
I owe everything to the Army's discipline. The way we keep our focus and practise without getting distracted is because of the Army's discipline. During the coronavirus (outbreak) time, we could continue with our practice. The Indian Army had a big role in it. We start boxing with the first lessons of discipline. If you are disciplined, then you can become a good boxer. Army life has a big role in it.

How did you become such a fearless fighter?
I was not like this from the beginning. When I became a sub-junior National champion, I became fearless. I try to dominate the bout and attack from the beginning. I have been boxing for the last 10 years and I have gathered enough experience at the National level and I have developed a mindset to win. This was my first exposure at the senior level and I got a lot of experience from this to know how to box in the future.

Who is your idol in boxing?
Prince Naseem (British professional boxer). He has the same style with guard down and he boxes fearlessly. I have learned a lot from him. Manish (Kaushik) is my idol from Bhiwani. I want to box like him.

What's your next target?
I want to improve. I will work on my game for that. I want to focus on my defence, and counterattacks. My next target is winning gold at the Commonwealth Games.

Are you thinking of changing your weight category?
I am not thinking about changing weight now. But if there are 10 weights in the Asian Games, then I will change to 57kg. My normal body weight remains three-four kg up (from 54kg).

How do you do unwind?
I relax and listen to music — Punjabi and Haryanvi music. Even if I go for a fight, I listen to music. It helps me a lot.

> “I owe everything to the Army's discipline. The way we keep our focus and practise without getting distracted is because of the Army's discipline. If you are disciplined, then you can become a good boxer. Army life has a big role in it.

All's well that ends well

The home fans are going to remember this edition of Indian Open for the two first-time Indian winners. Pushed firmly in the background was the huge risk the Badminton Association of India (BAI) took in going ahead with the event that could have ended prematurely.

Top form: India's Lakshya Sen who shared a 2-2 head-to-head record against world champion Loh Kean Yew before the final, nosed ahead with a straight game victory. PTI

RAKESH RAO

Sometimes, an act of bravado can land one in a seriously questionable situation, no matter how well it was pulled off.

The hosting of the India Open badminton in New Delhi was one such act by the Badminton Association of India (BAI) that raised eyebrows from the moment it decided to go ahead with the twice-postponed event in the face of the rising third wave of Covid.

To begin with, the field in all five sections was the weakest ever in India's flagship event. No participation from China, Japan, Chinese Taipei and Korea, among others, meant the field was predominantly Indian. For an event that offers $400,000 in prize money, the decision to go ahead with the competition that attracted such poor field across sections lacked rationale.

By the time the event ended with the last two finals producing Indian winners — Satwiksairaj Rankireddy-Chirag Shetty and Lakshya Sen — the Badminton Association of India had reasons to be joyous. It was simply a case of the end justifying the means.

Before moving ahead, it is important to consider the background. The Badminton World Federation (BWF) had decided to hold back-to-back events in certain countries, like India and a few others, to cut down on travel and mandatory quarantine periods for all concerned. As a result, India was to host events for three consecutive weeks in Delhi, Lucknow and Cuttack in January.

However, the global rise in Covid cases late in December made it challenging for the BAI. Understandably reluctant to host, BAI looked at the Delhi Government to impose restrictions so that it could convince the BWF that it was not possible to host the India Open. However, no such 'help' came from Delhi Government and BAI had no choice but to go ahead with the event.

"The BAI could not have cancelled the event on its own because that would have meant inviting the displeasure of BWF," said a BAI official on condition of anonymity and continued, "It was possible that the BWF would not have allotted events to the BAI in future or denied them World Tour events for at least another season. BAI did not want that."

So in this background, the India Open went ahead as per schedule. Daily RT-PCR tests at the hotel where the players, coaches, officials were staying and then a daily Rapid Antigen Test (RAT) was mandatory before one entered the venue, the K. D. Jadhav Hall at the Indira Gandhi Stadium.

Even before the first shuttle was tossed in the competition, news came that at least five Indian players had tested positive for Covid

YONEX-SUNRISE INDIA OPEN 2022

Golden duo: India's Satwiksairaj Reddy (left) and Chirag Shetty, the second seeds, upstaged three-time World champions Mohammad Ahsan and Hendra Setiawan in the final after saving five game-points in the second game.
PTI

and were awaiting another test report before departing for Delhi. News from Hyderabad was that a cook at the Gopi Chand Academy had tested positive and that possibly triggered a chain reaction.

Not surprisingly, men's second seed B. Sai Praneeth opened the casualty list. After the first round, top seed K. Srikanth, doubles specialist Ashwini Ponnappa and a few others joined the list of Covid-driven withdrawals. Those considered primary contacts of these players were also made to withdraw.

The withdrawals continued until the semifinals when a Russian doubles pair tested positive.

On the brighter side, the finalists were not affected. If one comes to the on-court action, it was indeed an opportunity for a large number of lesser-known Indian players to garner ranking points from this event. This apart, P. V. Sindhu and K. Srikanth were looking to break their World Tour title-jinx. Sindhu, the 2019 World champion, has not won on the Tour since 2018. Srikanth is without a title since 2017.

However, things did not go the way of these two top seeds. If Covid struck Srikanth, a shock defeat in the semifinals to a little-known Thai Supanida Katethong ended Sindhu's campaign.

Before that, Saina Nehwal's struggle with form and fitness continued. Nursing a knee-

YONEX-SUNRISE
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Jinx continues: A shock defeat in the semifinals to a little-known Thai Supanida Katethong ended P. V. Sindhu's campaign. PTI

injury and looking out of match-practice, Saina surrendered rather tamely to the up-and-coming Malvika Bansod, who in turn lost to India No. 3 Aakarshi Kashyap in the quarterfinals.

Bright news awaited India from the men's singles and doubles.

Lakshya, already dubbed as India's best prospect for a men's singles medal in the 2024 Paris Olympics, handled the pressure of expectations very well. Although he admitted not having trained as well as he would have liked to, Lakshya rode on the confidence of winning an unexpected World championship bronze and went all the way.

The victory over H. S. Prannoy in the quarterfinals truly did a world of good to Lakshya's confidence. During this match, Lakshya displayed tremendous self-belief and showed that he was not intimidated by Prannoy. And it was this confidence that he carried to the three-game victory in the semifinal over Malaysia's Ng Tze Yong and eventually in the final against World champion Loh Kean Yew.

In fact, Loh was the saving grace of the competition after most top players showed no interest in travelling to India. This young Singaporean is looking to prove his consistency in World Tour events and it was for this reason he chose to be in Delhi. Therefore, the World number 15 was expected to be a little circumspect as he carried the pressure of expectations in his first tournament appearance as a World champion.

Lakshya, who shared a 2-2 head-to-head record against Loh before the final, nosed ahead with a straight game victory. Given the conditions at the playing hall, the slowness of the shuttle suited Lakshya more than Loh. The speedy Singaporean, very light on his feet on the court, had to rally more than what he usually does and that worked in favour of Lakshya. Eventually, Lakshya deservedly won.

A little earlier, Sairaj and Chirag gave India a title that was not expected. The second seeds upstaged three-time World champions, current World No. 2 and top seed Mohammad Ahsan and Hendra Setiawan after saving five game-points in the second game.

The thrilling finish gave a much-needed title for the World No. 10 Indian duo. Winning the big points in the final against such a legendary pair should help Sairaj and Chirag to look ahead with added confidence. After all, in the two previous encounters against the Indonesians, the Indians failed to pull off a single game. But on this day, the plan of tiring off the 'Daddies' of world badminton just about worked.

In the end, the home fans are going to remember this edition of Indian Open for the two first-time Indian winners. Pushed firmly in the background was the huge risk BAI took in going ahead with the event that could have ended prematurely.

Final results (Indians unless stated):

Men: Lakshya Sen bt Loh Kean Yew (Sgp) 24-22, 21-17; (Doubles): Satwiksairaj Rankireddy & Chirag Shetty bt Mohammad Ahsan & Hendra Setiawan (Ina) 21-16, 26-24.

Women: Busanan Ongbamrungpham (Tha) bt Supanida Katethong (Tha) 22-20, 9-21, 21-13; (Doubles): Benyapa Aimsaard & Nuntakarn Aimsaard (Tha) bt Anastasiia Akchurina & Olga Morozova (Rus) 21-13, 21-5.

Mixed doubles: Hee Yong Kai Terry & Tan Wei Han (Sgp) bt Chen Tang Jie & Peck Yen Wei (Mas) 21-15, 21-18.

Charged up: Manchester City's Kevin De Bruyne (left), gets past Chelsea's N'Golo Kante on way to scoring the opening goal at the Etihad stadium in Manchester. AP

Man City consolidates top spot; new landmark for Lewandowski

From Manchester City virtually ending the title race by going 13 points clear at the top of the table to Robert Lewandowski scoring 300 Bundesliga goals, it was an eventful week of European football, marred by the pangs of the relentless pandemic that is Covid-19.

Premier League

Manchester City secured a 1-0 win against Chelsea courtesy of a Kevin De Bruyne screamer and solidified its position at the league summit.

It was a comfortable 3-0 win for Liverpool against Brentford. A Jack Harrison hat-trick guided Leeds United to a 3-2 win against West Ham United.

The woes continued for Ralf Rangnick's Manchester United as it conceded a 2-0 lead against Steven Gerrard's Aston Villa to finish the match 2-2. New-signing Philippe Coutinho shined for the Clarets on his debut, scoring and assisting once each to help his team claw back into the contest.

Arsenal's derby against Tottenham Hotspur was postponed after it was found that its squad was depleted by COVID-19 infections, injuries and players away at the Africa Cup of Nations.

Everton lost 2-1 to Norwich City, which

Joyous: Real Madrid's Vinicius Junior, right, is congratulated by teammate Toni Kroos after scoring his team third goal against Valencia at Santiago Bernabeu stadium in Madrid, Spain. AP

led to the sacking of manager Rafael Benitez.

After matchday 22, Manchester City sits on top of the table with 56 points. Liverpool, Chelsea and West Ham are second, third and fourth on 45, 43 and 37 points respectively. Arsenal sits fifth with 35 points, Tottenham sixth with 33 points and Manchester United seventh with 32 points.

La Liga

Real Madrid continued its confident march with a 4-1 win against Valencia.

Defending champion Atletico Madrid played out a 2-2 draw with Europa League holder Villarreal. Geoffrey Kondogbia of Atletico was shown a red card in the 92nd-minute. Barcelona played a 1-1 draw with Granada and that match also saw a red card with Gavi being sent off in the 79th-minute.

Sevilla secured a 1-0 win against Getafe and Real Betis drew 1-1 with Rayo Vallecano.

After matchday 20, Real Madrid leads the table with 49 points, followed by Sevilla, Real Betis and Atletico Madrid occupying second, third and fourth respectively with 44, 34 and 33 points. Barcelona is sixth with 32 points.

Bundesliga

Bayern Munich's 4-0 thumping of Cologne was nothing out of the ordinary but Bayern's Polish forward, Robert Lewandowksi, reached another landmark in German top-flight football. With his hat-trick in the match, he completed 300 goals in the Bundesliga and is now well within reach of the all-time Bundesliga record of 365 goals.

Borussia Dortmund thumped SC Freiburd 5-1 with Erling Haaland scoring a brace in the match.

Bayer Leverkusen edged a 2-1 win against Borussia Monchengladbach while

it was a 2-0 win for RB Leipzig against VfB Stuttgart.

After matchday 19, Bayern Munich retains top position with 46 points. Dortmund is second with 40 points followed by Leverkusen and Hoffenheim with 32 and 31 points. Last-season runner-up RB Leipzig is seventh with 28 points.

Serie A

The much-anticipated clash between Atalanta and Napoli turned out a bit anticlimactic as the match finished in a goalless draw.

Juventus won 2-0 against Udinese, the goals being scored by Paulo Dybala and Weston McKennie. Jose Mourinho's Roma secured a 1-0 win against Cagliari.

Currently, Inter is on top of the table with 50 points in 21 matches. Milan, Napoli and Atalanta follow in second, third and fourth with 48, 43 and 42 points. Juventus is just outside the Champions League place in fifth with 41 points, one less than Atalanta, which has another game in hand.

Ligue 1

Paris Saint-Germain did not seem to miss the services of Lionel Messi as it beat Brest with a comfortable 2-0 margin. Kylian Mbappe and Thilo Kehrer were the scorers in the match.

Lyon won 1-0 against Troyes while Monaco secured a solid 4-0 win against Clermont Foot.

Rennes thrashed Bordeaux 6-0 while defending champion LOSC Lille played out a 1-1 draw with Marseille.

After matchday 21, PSG tops the table with 50 points followed by Nice, Marseille and Rennes in second, third and fourth with 39, 37 and 34 points. Lyon finds itself languishing in the 11th position with 28 points while Lille is tenth with 29 points.

Compiled by Aneesh Dey

On target: Bayern Munich's Robert Lewandowski (right) shoots to score the opening goal of the game during the German Bundesliga match against FC Cologne. AP

‘WE ARE THERE FOR THE YOUNGSTERS’

“I think all payers are helpful to each other and that in turn helps the young players to get motivated, to perform well – not only on the pitch, but also off the pitch. Whoever comes in as captain has to help the young ones to be comfortable. We have to give them confidence to perform well. Whenever young ones need us, we are there for them,” says Mumbai City FC captain Mandar Rao Dessai.

Aiming high: Mandar Roa Desai of Mumbai City FC (left) and Anirudh Thapa of Chennaiyin FC in action during the ISL. "Our aim is to win ISL, the shield and the cup but we will go one game at a time and wait until March to see how far we go," Mandar says.
FOCUS SPORTS / ISL

NEELADRI BHATTACHARJEE

Mumbai City FC captain Mandar Rao Dessai is enjoying the record for the most appearances in the Indian Super League. But when he dons the MCFC jersey and the captain's armband, individual feats take a backseat.

Dessai and Senegalese defender Mourtada Fall are entrusted with captaincy this season and the 29-year-old said that the role of two captains was to have the team together and help youngsters.

"We respect each other and we do not have a very big role in the team (individually), because I think we are good as a team together," he said.

"I think all payers are helpful to each other and that in turn helps the young players to get motivated, to perform well — not only on the pitch, but also off the pitch," he said.

"Whoever comes in as captain has to help the young ones to be comfortable. We have to give them confidence to perform well. Whenever young ones need us, we are there for them."

Playing since the inaugural season of the Indian Super League, the defender has played with as well as under legends of the game, from Zico to Roberto Carlos and explained the role of foreigners in the league.

"There have been a lot of foreign players when the league started and now, as you know, there are four (allowed). In the first three-four seasons, the foreigners who came in — we could learn a lot from them."

"We had to be on that level so that we could perform better. I was with Lucio and Robert Pires, so I know how they helped us grow as a player and always gave the confidence to do well in the games," he said.

Talking about the head coach, Mandar said, "There are few changes here and there, but he has the same ideas. Des (Buckingham) is a lot more — how you go into the match in detail, how you play and be comfortable, because each and every game is different and we have to perform (in) every game in a different way."

"It is not easy and in a very short time we have to recover, not only physically but mentally as well and always get ready for the next one."

The Goa-born footballer helped Dempo earn promotion into the I-League for the 2015-16 season. The 2020-21 season saw Dessai lose his father to COVID-19, but he returned to ISL helping Mumbai City FC win the ISL title last season.

"I think it is always difficult how you get ready for the season, but as a professional player, you got to take everything in a positive way and concentrate on what you would like to do."

While Mumbai City FC stutters with three alternate losses after the first six games, Mandar is optimistic that his team stands a chance of returning to tune eventually in the league.

"Our aim is to win ISL, the shield and the cup but we will go one game at a time and wait until March to see how far we go," he said.

Transfers and sackings galore

Change at the helm: Juan Ferrando, the new head coach of ATK Mohun Bagan, has a word with his players during the ISL. FOCUS SPORTS/ ISL

The Indian Super League finished its first half of the season, welcomed new players and saw several head coaches being shown the door. As the league entered 2022, here are the top talking points.

Ferrando joins ATK Mohun Bagan, with Pereira replacing him at FC Goa

Juan Ferrando took charge of ATK Mohun Bagan after its former head coach Antonio Habas quit the club and the Spaniard triggered his release clause at FC Goa. The club, which had won just twice in the first six games under Habas, won its first two games under Ferrando, including a win against his former side FC Goa.

Goa got its panacea in the dugout in the form of former footballer Derrick Pereira, who steered the side to winning ways after a stuttering start.

SC East Bengal finds hope in Rennedy Singh

Both the Kolkata-based sides saw a change in head-coaches as Manuel Manolo Diaz parted ways with SC East Bengal as the side remained at the bottom of the table.

Former East Bengal Coach Mario Rivera, who guided the side to second place in I-League two seasons back was named his replacement and assistant coach Rennedy Singh took charge of the side till Rivera completed his mandatory quarantine.

The former Indian football captain, Singh's agility along the sidelines during the matches was lauded across social media platforms as the side drew two of the three matches under him, including a draw against defending champion Mumbai City FC.

With injuries and suspensions of foreigners, Singh started an all-Indian side for the first time in the league's history in his last match, against Jamshedpur FC.

ISL continues to see Indian forwards rise

The Indian Super League 2021-22 season has seen some amazing Indian goal scorers — be it Liston Colaco's stunner from distance, or Sahal Samad's sublime finishes.

After 55 matches, the number of goals and assists by Indians this season (51 goals, 53 assists) has almost doubled as compared

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to that in the inaugural season (22 goals, 30 assists).

COVID-19 disrupts ISL

Several ISL clubs suffered coronavirus outbreaks with three matches initially postponed.

The COVID-19 outbreak opened another pandora's box of worries with several players coming out to question why only matches involving ATKMB were postponed while another game, which had a team with nine players out with COVID, was allowed to go on.

The other issue stressed by the players was the difficulty of continuing to play in a biosecure bubble in spite of the virus outbreak.

"More time in a bubble? I think it's not healthy for the mind, nor is it healthy not to train for days and go play the game directly!" ATKMB defender Tiri tweeted.

Kerala Blasters find a new wall in Gill

Kerala Blasters had to suffer injury woes early on in the season with its first-choice keeper ruled out with an injury. Since then, its backup keeper Prabhsukhan Gill took charge and has been a revelation this season, leading the race for the Golden Glove with four clean sheets in four matches.

He has been instrumental in not just maintaining clean sheets, but also helping Kerala Blasters go on top of the ISL table for the first time in its history.

Chaos in Odisha FC

In a bizarre turn of events, Vinit Rai, one of the captains of the club, left the club on loan to Mumbai City FC, the first captain to switch ships this season. Jerry Mawihmingthanga was named the new captain.

A few days later, Odisha FC became the fourth club to undergo a change in its head coach this season, after SC East Bengal, ATK Mohun Bagan and FC Goa.

Kiko Ramirez, who had steered the side to an optimistic beginning was sacked after the team lost to Kerala Blasters, its third loss in three matches as the team remained ninth on the league table.

Fellow Spaniard and assistant coach Kino Garcia took over as interim coach of the side.

India has a great No. 9 in the making in Ishan Pandita

Jamshedpur FC found its own version of super-sub in Ishan Pandita, who earned five crucial points for the team, which became the difference for the team being inside or

Standing tall: Prabhsukhan Singh Gill, Kerala Blasters FC's goalkeeper saves a free kick from Eduardo Garcia Martin of Hyderabad FC during the ISL.
FOCUS SPORTS/ ISL

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Making waves: Ishan Pandita scored two back-to-back late goals against NorthEast United FC and SC East Bengal as JFC's head coach Owen Coyle eulogised the forward, saying India has a great No. 9 in the making.
FOCUS SPORTS / ISL

outside the top-four.

Pandita scored two back-to-back late goals against NorthEast United FC and SC East Bengal as JFC's head coach Owen Coyle eulogised the forward saying India has a great No. 9 in the making.

Arindam quits SC East Bengal captaincy

SC East Bengal had a tumultuous season, with its captain and former Golden Glove winner Arindam Bhattacharja injured in the Kolkata derby.

The team has also struggled with injuries and suspensions and is at the bottom of the table, the only side without a single win this season so far.

The goalkeeper and captain took to *Twitter* to announce his decision to step down as the captain of the Red-and-Gold brigade. "At this moment due to circumstances around me, I am stepping down as the captain of SC East Bengal," he said.

A tale of homecomings

The winter transfer window saw multiple homecomings from Sandesh Jhinghan to Nerijus Valskis and Marcelinho, but in different aspects.

Sandesh Jhinghan, the Indian defender, who had joined HNK Sibenik from ISL in August last year, re-joined ATK Mohun Bagan in January, without making a single appearance for the Croat side.

Nerijus Valskis, who had won the Golden Boot with Chennaiyin FC in his debut season in the ISL returned to the Marina Machans on a free transfer from Jamshedpur FC.

JFC signed Daniel Chima Chukwu from SC East Bengal as his replacement a week later, with Chima's former club signing Brazilian striker Marcelo Ribeiro on loan from Gil Vicente FC for the rest of the season. Another Golden boot winner, Marcelo Leite Pereira, better known as Marcelinho, returned to ISL on a loan spell after stints in Greece and Brazil.

The Brazilian has been involved in the league since 2016 and won the Golden Boot in his debut season with Delhi Dynamos — the team now known as Odisha FC.

In the January window, he moved to NorthEast United FC from I-League side Rajasthan United, as Khalid Jamil's side explored attacking options.

The 'Perosevic' conundrum

SC East Bengal was embroiled in a string of controversies with its forward Antonio Perosevic involved in one of them.

The Croatian was charged with "violent conduct" for his behaviour in SCEB's match against NorthEast United and was handed a five-match ban along with a fine of ₹1 lakh.

While he appealed against the ruling, the All India Football Federation dismissed it, upholding the ban and ordering him to pay a further ₹60,000 "towards the cost and expenses of the appeal".

Compiled by Neeladri Bhattacharjee

Optimistic: Indian skipper Ashalata Devi is excited about playing in the Asian Cup at the senior level. "It was always a dream to represent India in such big tournaments and we are aiming to qualify for the quarterfinals and create history by reaching the 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup," the 28-year-old centre-back says. AIFF MEDIA

India dreaming big

While host India aims to reach the last eight, champion Japan will look to reaffirm its status as the continent's best for the third successive time. A star-studded Australia and China will pose the biggest challenges to Japan.

AASHIN PRASAD

"We are really aiming for the really big tournament… going to be held Down Under," a cheerful Thomas Dennerby can't help but look beyond as he outlines the Indian women's team's ambitions at the upcoming AFC Asian Cup. The national team coach, of course, is talking about the FIFA Women's World Cup to be held in Australia and New Zealand next year. No Indian senior football team has ever played in a World Cup. Senior players Ashalata Devi and Yumnam Kamala Devi have also not shied away from expressing their dreams of playing in a football World Cup and making history.

Dennerby's "realistic target", though, at the Asian Cup is to qualify for the quarterfinals, which would bring an improbable dream a step closer. The top two from each

AFC WOMEN'S
ASIAN CUP
JORDAN 2018

Defending champion: Saki Kumagai of Japan lifts the trophy after winning the AFC Women's Asian Cup final against Australia at the Amman International Stadium on April 20, 2018 in Amman, Jordan. GETTY IMAGES

of the three groups, along with the two best third-placed teams from the groups will make it to the quarterfinals. A semifinal place would assure a World Cup berth.

But according to the FIFA rankings, India is the ninth best-ranked team in the 12-team event. The top-tier domestic league, the Indian Women's League (IWL), hasn't found a place in the All India Football Federation (AIFF) calendar since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

India's first-ever women's professional league — IWL — was launched in 2016, and 33 matches between six teams are played in the afternoons of February-March. The Asian reigning champion Japan has had an active women's league since 1989 and has a three-tier pyramid system after it launched a new top-division — WE League — last year. The WE League has 11 teams playing a total of 121 matches.

India's performance in the Asian Cup — after it was officially recognised by the FIFA and the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) — isn't encouraging between 1995 and 2003. India failed to qualify for the last five editions and is playing the 2022 edition as the host nation.

Despite the numbers and circumstances stacked against it, progression into the final-eight stage is not beyond the realms of possibility. Since the Swedish coach's elevation from the girls' under-17 team to the senior team, the national side has made notable strides over the past five months. Dennerby has spent a significant amount of time with the squad, improving their fitness and focussing on tactical training. The team also played pre-tournament friendlies in the UAE, Bahrain, Sweden, and Brazil, returning with three wins and six defeats including a victory over the higher-ranked Chinese Taipei, who the Blues will face in their group this month.

While the team was largely outplayed in the four-nation tournament in Brazil against opponents with superior technical ability, Manisha Kalyan's goal on the counterattack against the current Copa America Femenina champion Brazil gave a glimpse of the threat it possesses. However, it was the matches in the UAE and Bahrain that pleased Dennerby as the team showed better organisation and fitness levels.

India, however, will miss the services of the experienced Rangers forward Bala Devi, who was unable to recover in time for the tournament. The relatively young squad, with an average age of 23, was bolstered by the addition of Kamala Devi, who returned to the set-up after her boycott in 2018 over the then coaching personnel. Midfielder Indumathi Kathiresan, who has been among the best domestic players in recent years, will get an opportunity to showcase her talents on the continental stage.

Marquee player: Chelsea's Sam Kerr will lead Australia's charge in the women's AFC Asian Cup in India. REUTERS

Skipper Ashalata Devi is excited about playing in the Asian Cup at the senior level. "It was always a dream to represent India in such big tournaments and we are aiming to qualify for the quarterfinals and create history by reaching the 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup," the 28-year-old centre-back says. The squad also has exciting young talents in Kalyan, Pyari Xaxa, Dalima Chibber, Ratnabala Devi and Renu.

The tournament will be held behind closed doors, but a good showing could help Indian women's football to draw newer audiences. "If we go to the quarterfinal, that will be a successful tournament for us and I hope that can encourage a lot of young girls to have these players as their idols and start aiming to play for the national team in five or 10 years," says Dennerby.

Oinnam Bembem Devi, the most capped Indian international, echoes Dennerby's sentiments. "The Asian Cup 2022 can motivate and help inspire women footballers of the country. By taking advantage of advertisements as well as mass participation, the coming competition will show the capabilities of women in football," Bembem says.

Dennerby wants the tournament to bring a positive change for women's football. "Whatever we do here, the most important thing for a country is the grassroots. The more players that play at a young age will give the head coach more players to select from and so on. From the state team to the national team, the more players you have, the better quality in the end. Hopefully, this can change Indian women's football for a long time," he says.

While India aims to reach the last eight, champion Japan will look to reaffirm its status as the continent's best for the third successive time. A star-studded Australia, which lost the last two finals, led by Chelsea's Sam Kerr, will pose the biggest challenge to Japan. Australia's squad is packed with talents from the Women's Super League and other leading European clubs.

Asian Cup superpower China, which has won the tournament eight times, will be raring to re-establish its supremacy from the 90s with Tang Jiali (Tottenham Hotspur) and Wang Shuang (Wuhan Jianghan University) at the heart of the side.

Bigger responsibilities: Thomas Dennerby was promoted from the U-17 role to the senior team by the All India Football Federation (AIFF) last August. AIFF MEDIA

Dennerby aspires to inspire women's team for Asian Cup challenge

Thomas Dennerby, the Indian women's senior national team coach, says the target is to reach the quarterfinals of the AFC Asian Cup.

AASHIN PRASAD

Thomas Dennerby, the Indian women's senior national team coach, is confident with the preparations for the home AFC Women's Asian Cup in Maharashtra. The former Sweden and Nigeria national women's team coach was promoted from the U-17 role to the senior team by the All India Football Federation (AIFF) last August.

The experienced Swede spoke to *Sportstar* on the changes he has incorporated since his appointment, what he expects at the Asian Cup and more.

How has the preparation come along ahead of the Asian Cup?

Absolutely. All good so far. We have had almost 200 sessions since we started in August. More than 100 football sessions, running, and strength sessions. Add to that, there were team and tactical sessions in classrooms. Hopefully, we are ready now and we are looking forward to the start of the tournament. You have the feeling now, it's getting closer. Now, it's time to do it.

How is the mood in the camp closer to the tournament?

There is no issue regarding motivation. If you are not motivated for a tournament like this, you should

Looking ahead: Dennerby believes that a good show at the Asian Cup will encourage a lot of young girls to take up the sport more seriously. AIFF MEDIA

probably do something else (laughs). It's really nice, we have a good environment. The girls are happy, we had an inspirational meeting, had a little bit of pep talk and saw videos of all the tough training we have done in the past. We could see a change in the eyes of the girls. It's also fun for us to see that the girls are ready.

The team has stayed in a bubble for a long time. How have you kept them fresh through the period?

For us staff, we need to be the inspirational ones, pushing them every day. No person, whether it's a staff or a player, can have your best day in all the 150 days we spent together. As coaches and players, we need to know when to change the mood. Sometimes it's just hard work, sometimes I have to go through painful moments to go to the next steps. Our job is to motivate when it's super tough and their muscle soreness is bad, or when they run a lot or lift weights or to wake them up from bed, then you have to push them anyway. We are now not doing double sessions like we used to. Now, all the hard work is done. We can't change the level of the player. It's about inspirational stuff and tactical training. The hard time is over.

Have you covered all the bases with your selection?

We have a really good mix. We have players with speed, playing vision, players who are tough and are good passing players. We have two players for every spot on the team. We have good back-ups for each position. Hopefully, that will also help us in a long tournament. Everyone needs to be ready, not just the first XI. Everyone is as important as the No. 1 player. This is a team sport and what counts is what we do together.

What was your assessment of the task at hand when you were appointed in August? What are the changes you sought to make the team a competitive unit for the tournament?

When I arrived, the good thing with the players was that they had a good playing vision, players with speed and good passing play in midfield. That was really, really good. But the thing that I felt that we lacked was the fitness level. When you are playing at a higher tempo, you need to raise the fitness level. Be a little bit stronger in duels and one-v-one situations. That comes with your balance and strength and conditioning training.

When it came to tactical, we were looking for the quick forward players very early. We were sending balls from defending lines. We are working on good patterns, where we are going through midfield and playing the crucial passes with accuracy in higher positions in the field, make it easier to receive for the forwards to make it harder for the opponent's defensive line to defend against. Those were the key issues. We worked all areas: individual, technical development and tactical. The key was to play those crucial passes from higher positions.

With the friendly matches you played, are you

Moment to cherish: The Indian team is all smiles after an international friendly with South American giant Brazil. AIFF MEDIA

seeing the desired results ahead of the tournament?

Yes, I think we played different opponents with different levels and playing styles. In the first tour, we went to UAE and Bahrain and came out with three wins [from four matches]. That was good and, honestly, these teams couldn't handle the tempo we were playing at, which was a positive for us. We played two Premier League teams in Sweden. They were very equal games and the result could have gone either way. And finally, the tour to Brazil when we played against a totally another style of football. So extremely comfortable with the ball all three teams [Brazil, Chile and Venezuela].

Brazil is a little bit better than the other two but still, they are very comfortable and cultured with the ball. It's so easy for them to handle [the ball], they never looked under pressure. The passing game they have is very good and they were very fair games and it helped us a lot to understand the highest level. It also helped us in understanding three hard games in a short time with the preparation of eating, sleeping, treatment and training [much like the Asian Cup schedule]. You don't have time for anything else.

You have played both Asian and South American opponents. How do the two styles compare against each other and how will those matches help India compete against the best in the Asian Cup this month?

We have been watching Iran and we have seen them play. If we look at the style, they are more similar to the teams we played in UAE and Bahrain but better I would say. They are a really strong team with tough girls. That will be a challenge for us. In game 2, we have Chinese Taipei, who we played in Bahrain. We won 1-0. That gave us a little bit of confidence that we can handle teams from our group but still it is a good team. When it comes to competition, it's a little bit about how one handles experience in those games. We have played China a lot and they are a typical Asian team, I would say. A lot of short passes, good combinations and good balance. A lot of through passes and instinctive passes, which will be a big challenge for us. Although they are not of the same level when they won this tournament seven or eight times in a row, they are still a good team.

What would this competition mean for the women's team and women's football in the country?

Our target is to be in the quarterfinals. That is a good step for us to make and that will give us an opportunity to stake a place in the World Cup. We can't focus too far, we have to take it one game at a time. If we reach the quarterfinals, that will be a successful tournament for us and I hope that can encourage a lot of young girls to have these girls as their idols and start aiming to make the national team in 5-10 years.

Whatever we do here, the most important thing for a country is the grassroots. From state team to the national team, the more players you have, the better quality in the end. Hopefully, this can change Indian women's football for a long time.

Grit and determination of a shuttler

NETRA V

At a time when athletes used to stay mum about their training, the sporting system and the authorities in that system or organisation, Sanjay Sharma decided to be upfront and vocal about it. Having represented India in the field of badminton for over 16 years as a player and a coach, Sharma's autobiography *"Match Point — A Shuttler's Story"* reflects his strong personality and his opinionated nature. Be it writing for the media while playing for the country or being suspended and given a life ban by the then Badminton Association of India for writing about them, Sharma has endured it all.

Inside the insightful 219-page long book lies the grit and determination of a shuttler who fought numerous battles on and off the badminton court. The first few pages of the book starts with his current struggle against Caveroma in the spinal cord and his family support before harking back to his career in Indian badminton from 1975 to 1990 (as a player) and 1998-2003 (as a coach).

Among the several wins in his career, Sharma feels that the win against Malaysia in the 1979 Asian Zone Thomas Cup finals in their home ground was the most memorable. "Playing the first doubles against the then World No. 2, Pradeep Gandhe and I played out of our skin to carve a huge win, which helped India defeat Malaysia for the first time," he states.

While regretting not winning the national singles titles because of the presence of stalwarts like Prakash Padukone and Syed Modi, his gratitude towards the two players comes out throughout the book. Appreciating Padukone, Sharma nicknames him the 'boss' whilst giving the readers an in-depth perspective of the Indian badminton scene during the 1970s and 80s.

The three major happenings

The chapter *'Earning my place under the sun'* begins with Sharma recollecting his past accolades including his stint at the German league and the trajectory of Indian badminton. However, at the end of the chapter, he mentions three major happenings in 1981-82 that had an immense bearing on his future.

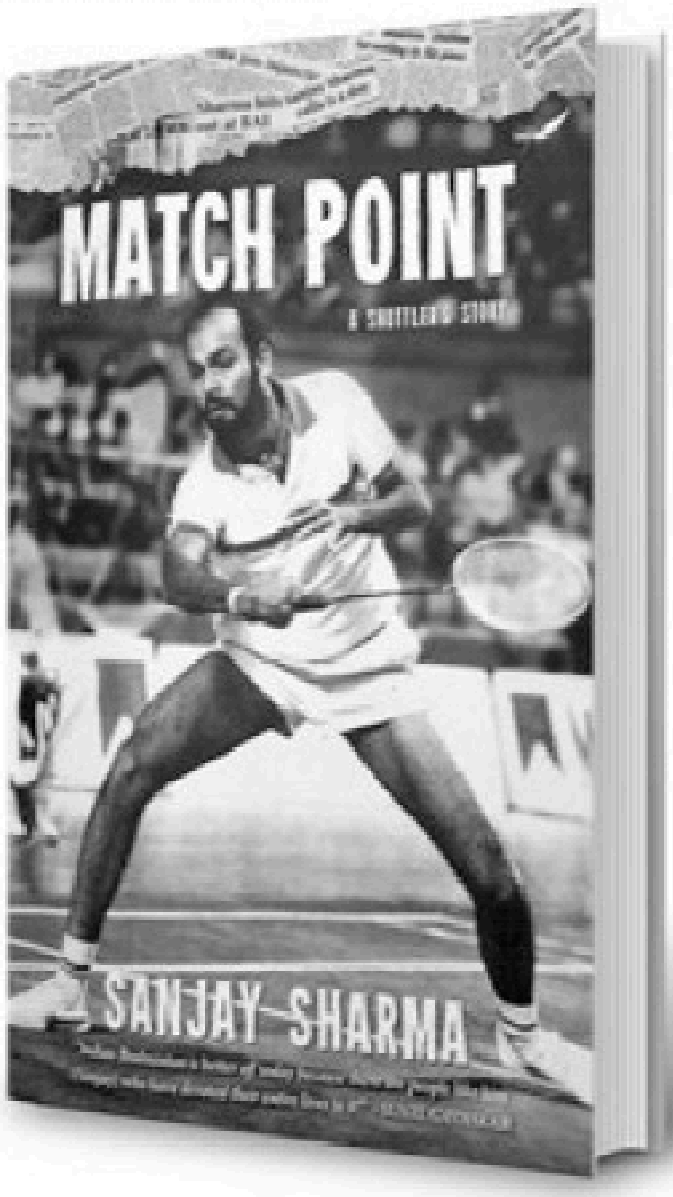
"Firstly, I was forced to get into coaching even while I was playing for India. Secondly, I wrote my first few articles which were published in 1981. And thirdly, my skirmish with the BAI started in this fateful year."

He trained Rajeev Bagga, who not only went on to win senior national singles/doubles titles, but also won in 'The Deaf Olympics'. His dedication towards badminton is evident with the number of top players he had worked with, like Pullela Gopichand, Jwala Gutta, Chetan Anand and many others who went on to win several national championship titles. When he started writing for the Press, he was not aware of what was to come and its consequences. "My writing naturally came in conflict with the way badminton was administered by the BAI," he says.

He points the state of Indian badminton at that time, where there was no money, no facilities for players, and hostile officialdom, an ambience for *'chamchagiri'* as Sharma calls the then BAI, where the players were victims.

Having chosen to bring out the inside dealings of the BAI, Sharma was threatened, served a show-cause notice and called a pariah but his determination and commitment towards the sport is one of the reasons for better badminton facilities in India today.

Be it writing for the media while playing for the country or being suspended and given a life ban by the then Badminton Association of India for writing about them, Sanjay Sharma has endured it all.



From the tome

But why did I play the game in the manner I did, feuding with the chief administrators of the game who wielded real power? A question that many have asked me. My answer is that in my way, I contributed to the game. But my tragedy is that despite my achievements on badminton courts, I am remembered more for my writings in the Press and my constant fights with BAI from 1982 onwards.

Tamed: Teams seem to have figured out the tricks of seasoned warhorses like Pardeep Narwal who has found little to no success with his trademark *dubki* so far this season. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Newcomers share limelight; teams risk burnout

55 games down, PKL 8 has been one of the closest tournaments yet. Old stars and promising newcomers have taken turns to prove their mettle but do teams have a plan to tackle bubble fatigue?

LAVANYA LAKSHMI NARAYANAN

After a COVID-induced two-year interruption, the Pro Kabaddi League (PKL) returned for a long-awaited eighth season in December 2021. With old stars and promising newcomers taking turns to prove their mettle, PKL 8 has been evenly fought so far.

Here are Sportstar's top takeaways from the league after the completion of 55 games:

Step aside, legends

To say that PKL veterans like Pardeep Narwal, Ajay Thakur, Rahul Chaudhari, Siddharth Desai and Nitin Tomar have had a quiet season so far does not quite sum things up. Thakur (five points from five games) and Chaudhari (nine points from four games), former teammates at Tamil Thalaivas and now representing Dabang Delhi and Puneri Paltan respectively have had little to no impact on the proceedings and have eventually dropped out of the starting seven.

Narwal (59 points from nine games), the *dubki* king, crossed the impressive 1200-point threshold recently but his opponents

Indispensable: Dabang Delhi's Naveen Kumar has been the backbone of the team's scoring, with the side looking hapless in his absence.
SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

seem to have him figured out, with the UP Yoddha star spending a considerable chunk of time on the bench. Tomar looked promising for the Paltan with seven points in their opening game against Delhi but sustained an injury immediately after, hampering hopes of consistency. Desai, too, had little success with the Telugu Titans and has been sitting out after sustaining a wrist injury.

Instead, the likes of Arjun Deshwal (109 points in nine games) for Jaipur Pink Panthers, Aslam Inamdar (67 points in nine games) for Puneri Paltan, Meetu Mahender (51 points from nine games) for Haryana Steelers, Rajnish (39 points from four games) for Titans and V. Ajith Kumar (59 points from 7 games) for U Mumba have made heads turn with a few jaw-dropping performances that have sometimes single-handedly helped their teams win games.

The need to stay in the present

Two teams who particularly frustrated fans and pundits alike with their selection calls were Telugu Titans and Dabang Delhi. Their strategy to go with experience has greatly misfired as Delhi's Thakur, Manjeet Chhillar (18 points from nine games) and Titans' Rohit Kumar (six points from five games) have been lacklustre.

From the aforementioned trio, Chhillar has shown a gradual improvement in fortunes, while Thakur and Kumar are yet to set the mat on fire this season. If these teams want to finish the season with the trophy, a few bold decisions are in order, however hard those may be.

Workload management

This season is shorter in terms of the window it occupies this year but that means more matches in a day and triple headers every Saturday. There is hardly any time for rest and recovery as niggles, injuries, fatigue are all creeping into teams. Delhi's Naveen Kumar (133 points in eight games) has, as expected, been a standout raider, even picking up a few nifty records along the way but his workload is incredible. His form has faltered a little in the past few games and his team suffered a massive 39-point defeat against Bengaluru Bulls in the game he sat out. U Mumba's Ajith Kumar is another example, with his team losing meekly to Patna Pirates by 20 points in his absence.

Workload management in a bubble where all you can think, watch and do is kabaddi is crucial for the fortunes of these teams going forward.

MEET THE JURY

Six eminent personalities headed by former India cricket captain Sunil Gavaskar form the jury for **Sportstar Aces Awards 2022.**

Sunil Gavaskar

Since making his international debut against the West Indies in 1971, Sunil Gavaskar was the fulcrum of the Indian batting till his retirement in 1987. He was the first batter to accumulate 10,000 Test runs and ended his career with a then-record 34 Test centuries. Ever since he bid adieu from cricket a little over three decades ago, Gavaskar, one of the sport's legends, has carved a niche for himself as a media personality. His punditry is looked forward to by the faithful when India's cricketers are seen in action in whites as well as in the blues. The batting maestro plays badminton and follows most other sports that come under the ambit of the multi-discipline Olympic arena and appeals to a vast majority of the Indian populace.

M. M. Somaya

M. M. Somaya has had a distinguished sports career. Having represented his home state Maharashtra at the junior level in hockey, football, and athletics, he eventually chose hockey as his game of true calling. Playing in the right-half position Somaya has had the distinction of taking part in three Olympic Games — Moscow, 1980; Los Angeles, 1984; and Seoul, 1988. He was a member of the team that won the Olympic Gold in Moscow in 1980 and was captain of the Olympic team in the 1988 Seoul Olympics. He has also represented the country at two World Cups, two Asian Games and three Champions Trophies.

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Viswanathan Anand

Viswanathan Anand is one of the greatest sporting icons of our time. He is the first Asian to win the World chess championship and single-handedly transformed India into a major power in the mind sport. A five-time World champion, he is still a force to reckon with at the highest level. In 2017, he won the World rapid chess championship at the age of 48. He is remarkably articulate, polite to a fault and the nicest World champion — in any sport — you could ever hope to meet.

Aparna Popat

For a decade starting 1997, Aparna Popat remained the undisputed queen of Indian badminton. She won nine consecutive national singles titles — a record. Coached by Anil Pradhan, Prakash Padukone, Vimal Kumar and Ganguly Prasad at different stages of her illustrious career, Popat was the first woman shuttler to represent India at two successive Olympic Games (in 2000 and 2004). Achieving a best world ranking of 16, she won two singles medals and one team medal at the Commonwealth Games.

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Anjali Bhagwat

For many years, Anjali Bhagwat had no equal on the distaff side of shooting, a sport which demands a high degree of excellence in the technical aspects. The first woman to break the glass ceiling in shooting, Anjali proved to be an expert in the 10m Air Rifle and Rifle 3 Position. She has won a mind-boggling 31 gold medals, 23 silver medals and seven bronze medals in various international meets such as the SAF Games, Commonwealth Games, Asian Championships, Asian Games and World Cups. She is coaching at the grassroots now.

Bhaichung Bhutia

Hailed as the torchbearer of Indian football in the modern era, Bhaichung Bhutia revolutionised the sport in the country in the 21st century. Bhutia was the guiding light for generations of footballers in the country with his unmatched skills and leadership on the football field. He has played for multiple clubs but became synonymous with East Bengal, which recognised him as the most valuable player when the club turned 100. He also played for English league side Bury FC. With the national team, Bhutia won the SAFF Championships three times and won the AFC Challenge Cup in 2008, which enabled India to compete in the AFC Asian Cup for the first time since 1984.

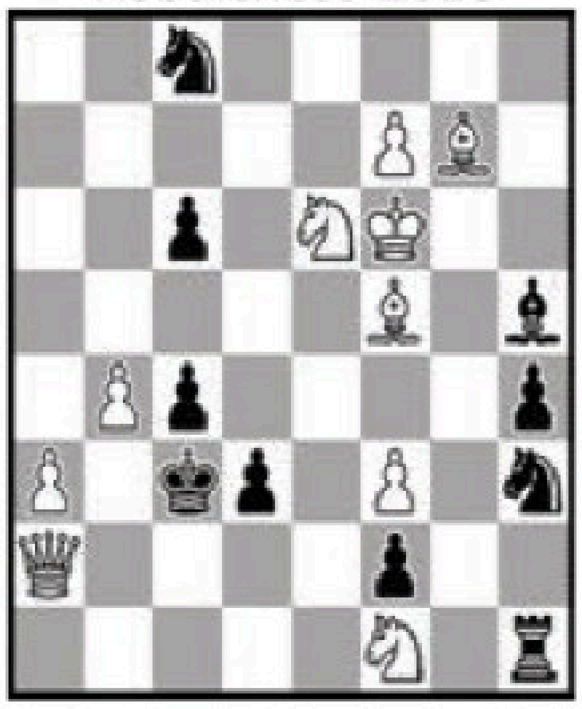
The Sportsar Aces awards are presented by Byju's Classes with IDFC First Bank as the Associate Partner. Other partners are: Odisha – Sports Destination Partner; Union Bank of India – Banking Partner; Nippon Paint – Colour Partner; Life Insurance Corporation of India – Insurance Partner; ONGC – Associate Partner.

Royal battery in threat correction

By C.G.S.Narayanan

What is threat correction? A random removal of a white piece introduces a threat which is defeated by a black defence.No other move of this white piece can prevent this defence and so white changes,rather corrects, the original threat. For completenesss the initial threat is required to reappear as mate after some other black defence. In this article the first two problems feature threat correction combined with Royal battery i.e a battery with white king as frontal piece.In the first example below there are threat corrections by two pieces Wne6 and WBf5,both provide exit squares for the Royal battery.

V.Shansin
Kobulchess 2015

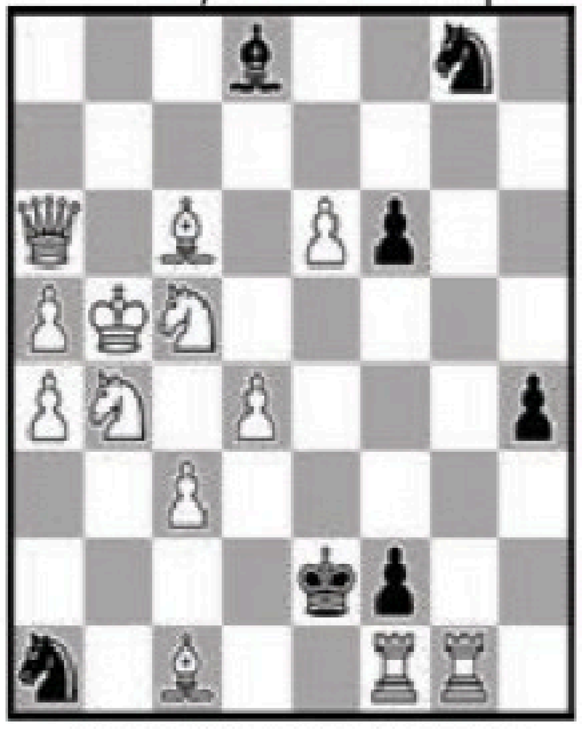


Mate in two moves

1.eN any?(2.Ke6)1...Nf4 2.Kg5 but Rg1! 1.Nd4? (2.Qa1 threat correction not 2.Ke6?)1...Kxd4 2.Ke6 but 1...Rxf1! 1...fB any? (2.Kf5) Rg1! **Key 1.Bxd3!** (2.Qc2! threat correction not 2.Kf5?)1...cxd3 2.Kf5 1...Kxd3 2.Qd2.

There are two other tries by the thematic pieces which try to parry the black defence Rg1 but fail.
1.eNg5? avoids 1..Rg1 but 1...Nf4 defeats.Similarly 1.Bg4 or Bg6? fails to 1...d2 which defeats by square vacation.

M.Kovacevic
1 Hon.Men,3 World Cup 2013

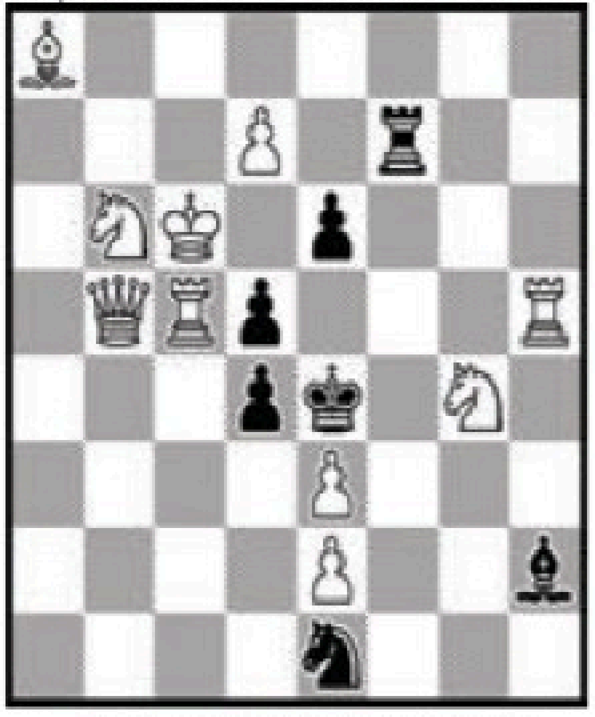


Mate in two moves

The second problem extends the threat corrrection to three pieces.
1.bN any?(2.Kb4) Nc2!
1.Nd5!? (2.Nf4 threat correction Kb4?) 1...fxg1Q/N 2.Kb4 but Bc7!
B any?(2.Kc6) Ne7!
1.Be8?! (2.Bh5 threat correction Kc6?)1..fxg1Q/N 2.Kc6 but Nh6!
1.cN any? (2.Kc5) Nb3!
1.Ne4!! (2.Rxf2 threat correction Kc5?)1...fxg1Q/N 2.Kc5

In the diagram below for solving which one of the three pieces near the WK should vacate for the Royal battery to function?

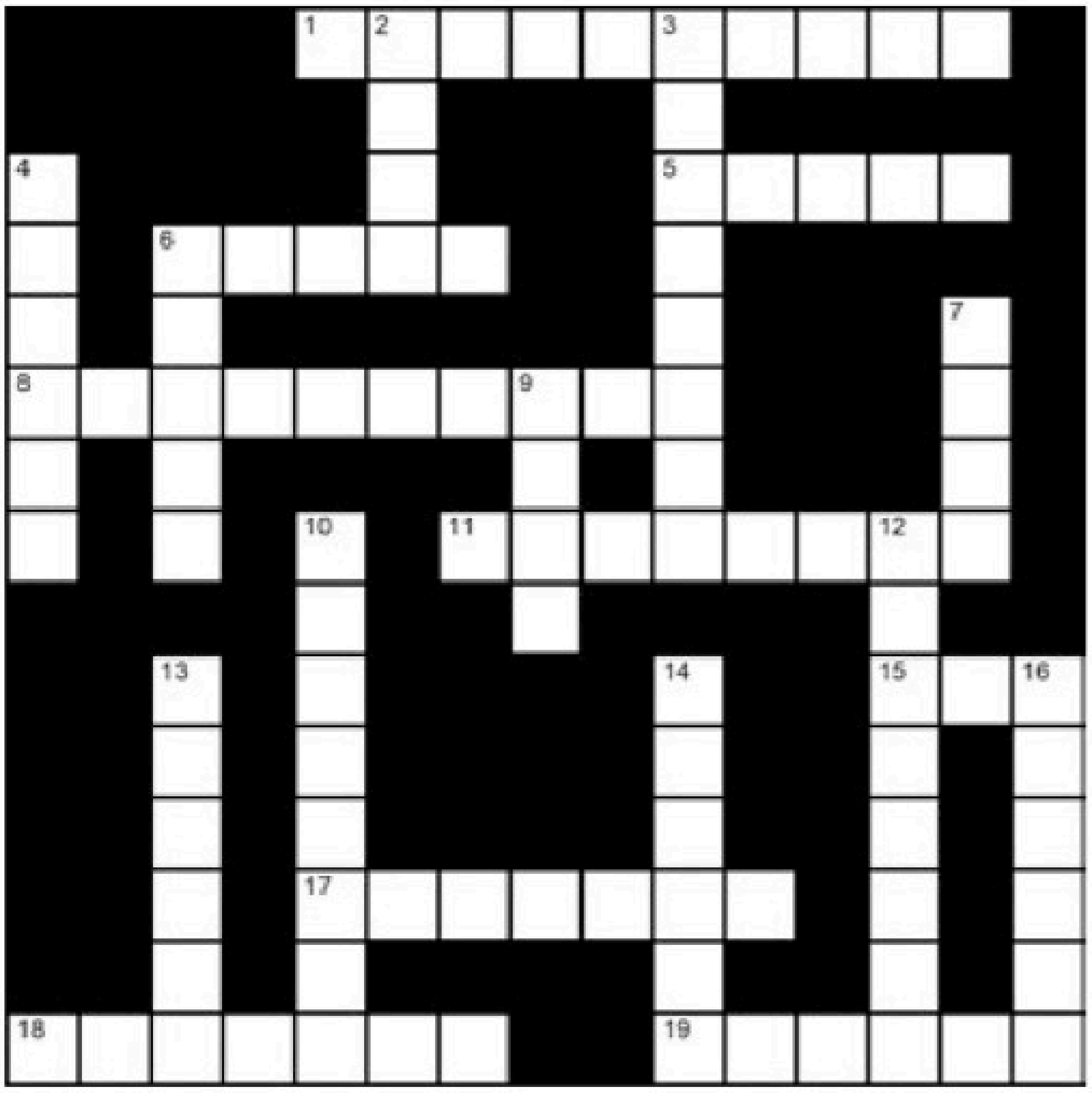
V.Kopyl
1st Pl,Ukranian Team Ch 2014



Mate in two moves

Solution to problem for solving in the article 'Mansfield theme': Key 1.Bh5! 1...Qxg4 2.Bb4;1...Rxg4 2.Bf4; 1..Kxc2 2.Bxe1

Readers may send in their queries to
cgsnarayanan@hotmail.com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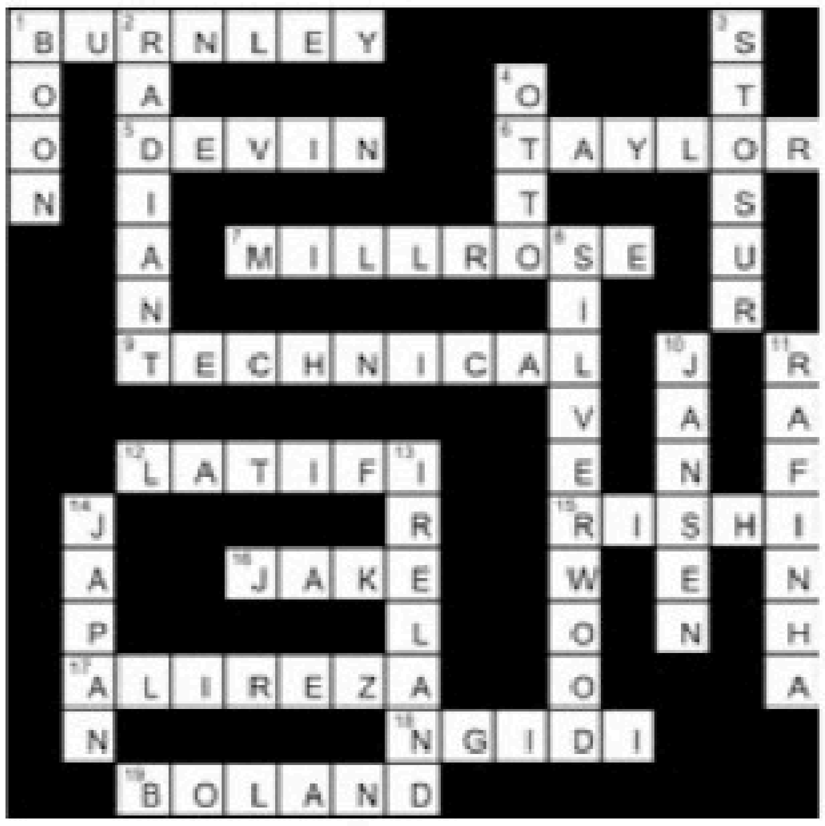

BURNLEY
DEVIN
TAYLOR
MILLROSE
TECHNICAL
LATIFI
RISHI
JAKE
ALIREZA
NGIDI
BOLAND
BOON
RADIANT
STOSUR
OTT
SILVERWOOD
JANSEN
RAFINHA
IRELAND
JAPAN

SOLUTION TO LAST FORTNIGHT'S CROSSWORD

ACROSS

1 His third Test wicket came off the last ball of his 112th match, also his last. (4,6)

5 Kande Arachchige ... Udana Tillakaratna. (5)

6 The Pro Kabaddi League team from Bengaluru. (5)

8 The trophy for under-19 cricketers in India. (5,5)

11 Manchester United's interim manager. (8)

15 Eileen ..., who lived up to the age of 110, becoming the longest-lived international cricketer. (3)

17 Lorenzo ..., Italian footballer who till recently captained Napoli. (7)

18 ... Subramaniyam, India's 73rd GM. (7)

19 A Test fast bowler who calls himself a soldier of the Bangladeshi Air Force. (6)

DOWN

2 The ..., the ground in Kennington that is home to the Surrey cricket club. (4)

3 No. 1 squash player in the world. (3,5)

4 The New York NBA team based in Manhattan. (6)

6 Yorkshire's Harry ..., just added to the England T20 squad, has a surname that sounds similar to the one that West Indian Shamarh has. (5)

7 The black, flat, round piece used in ice hockey. (4)

9 The F1 team that Nikita Mazepin represents. (4)

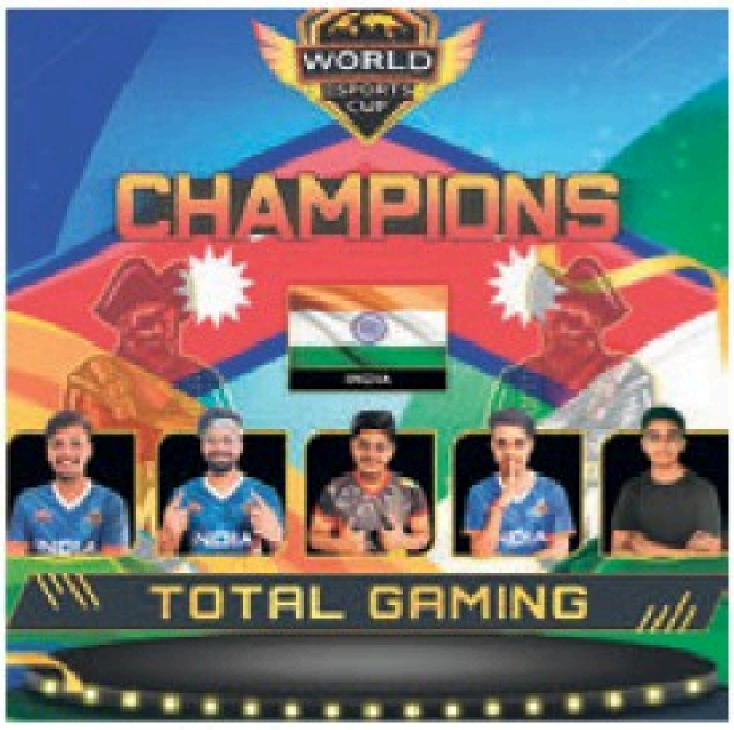
10 Tennis player Elena Andreyevna ... (8)

12 Nicknamed Bud, boxer Terence ... (8)

13 ... Punia, Indian women's hockey captain for the Asia Cup. (6)

14 South African ... Olivier. (6)

16 The Bellerive Oval is here. (6)



India bags World Esports Cup 2021

India's Total Gaming lifted the World Esports Cup 2021 title, beating opponents from Pakistan and Nepal in the Global Finals.

A neck-and-neck competition saw Total Gaming, comprising skilled and renowned players including captain Ajay Sharma, Hora Vetkumar, Narai Yadav, Daksh Garg, and Rohit Sarraf (sub), get past the other teams across three countries for the prestigious title with 342 total points (RP 198, KP 144) as it took home Rs. 35 lakhs for its top spot finish. Chemin Esports and Orangutan Elite secured second and third position respectively and won prize money of Rs. 15 lakh and Rs. 8 lakh respectively.

South Asia's premier tri-nation esports tournament, WEC '21 witnessed huge participation with 1.2 million registrations from India, Pakistan and Nepal, and saw the Indian teams finish in the top four.

Total Gaming's Daksh aka Mafia, with 53 kills, was adjudged the Most Valuable Player of the Tournament and also received Rs. 50,000.

■ **TEAM SPORTSTAR**

CÉRÉMONIE DES VAINQUEURS
25
ELEIKO

Pandoo appointed as first HPD for weightlifting

The Indian Weightlifting Federation (IWLF) will get the services of its first high-performance director (HPD), Aveenash Pandoo, until the 2024 Paris Olympic Games.

The Union Sports Ministry has approved the appointment of Pandoo at an annual salary of $54,000 (approximately Rs. 40.50 lakh), said a release.

The HPD has been appointed with a specific focus on the development of junior talent with an eye on the 2028 Olympics. Pandoo will also help create a strong coaching structure to help India produce international champions.

IWLF president Sahdev Yadav told *Sportstar* that Pandoo — who has the experience of working with the International Weightlifting Federation (IWF) on the Development and Education Committee (from 2013 to 2017) — would join duty at the end of January. "Even though his appointment is up to Paris 2024, it can be reviewed and can be extended. He will look after our junior development programmes at National Centres of Excellence (NCOEs) in Patiala, Aurangabad and Lucknow," said Yadav.

■ **Y. B. SARANGI**

104
193
195
13

AFI postpones Indian Open race walking

The Athletics Federation of India has postponed the ninth Indian Open and the fifth international race walking competitions which were scheduled to be held in Ranchi, Jharkhand, on February 5 and 6.

The AFI explained that it was forced to postpone the race walking events owing to the surge in COVID-19 cases and restrictions from the State Government on sports activities.

Olympians Sandeep Kumar, Priyanka Goswami and Manish Rawat, the reigning champions in their respective categories, were to take part in the nationals, a qualifying event for the world athletics championships in July 2022.

The Athletics Federation of India (AFI) had earlier postponed the national youth athletics championships 2022, which were scheduled to be held in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh from January 27-29.

The announcement came after the Asian youth athletics championships 2022 in Kuwait from March 1-4 was postponed due to a surge in COVID-19 cases.

■ **TEAM SPORTSTAR**

Tasnim Mir is World No. 1 in u-19 badminton

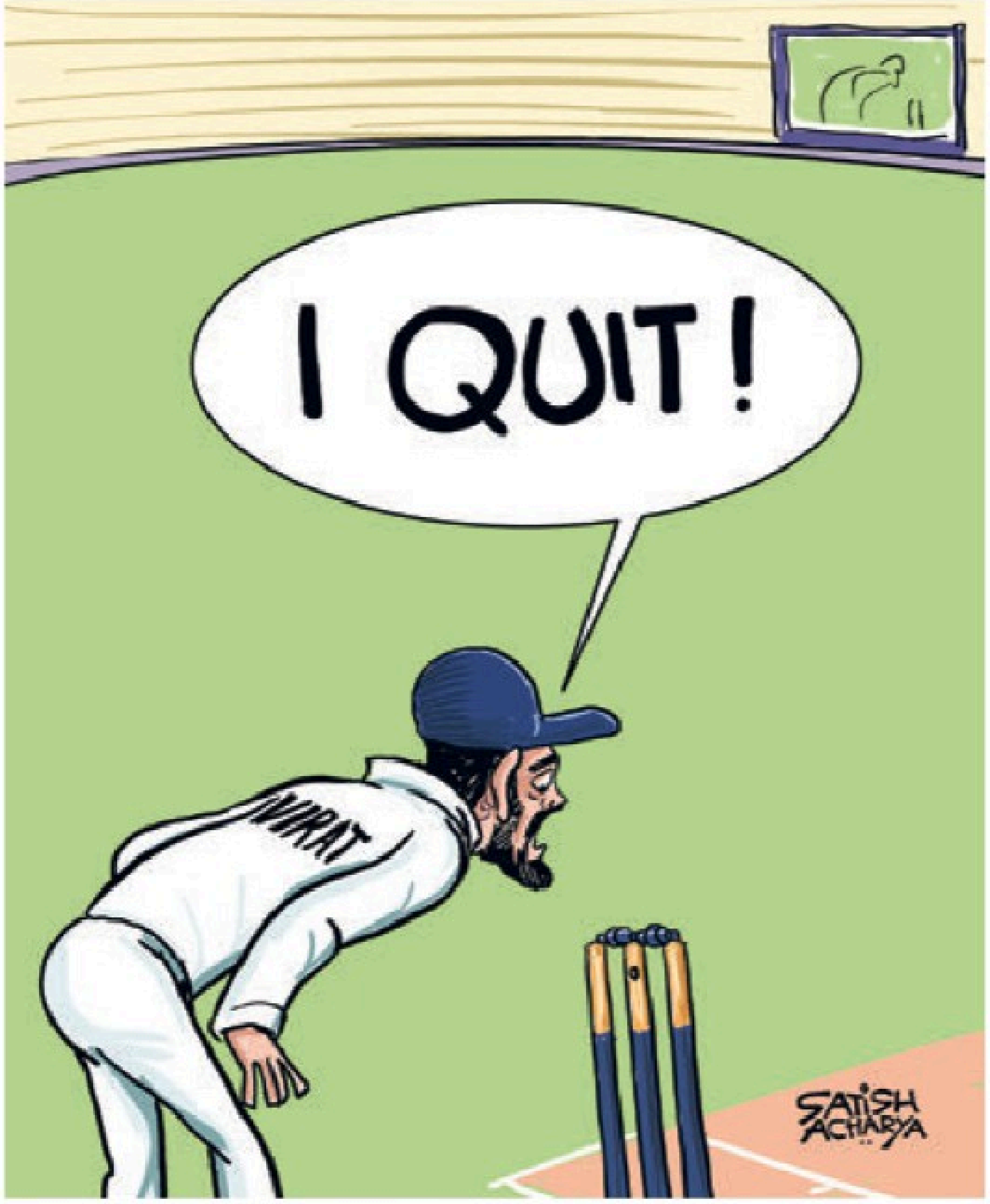
Young shuttler Tasnim Mir became the first Indian to grab the world No. 1 ranking in the under-19 girls singles in the latest BWF junior rankings.

The 16-year-old from Gujarat was rewarded for last year's stellar run when she had secured titles in three junior international tournaments to jump three places to grab the top position in the junior world rankings.

"I can't say that I expected this. I thought I will not be able to become No. 1 as tournaments were getting affected by COVID-19, but I won three events in Bulgaria, France and Belgium. So I am really excited and happy that finally, I could become the world No 1. It is a great moment for me," Tasnim said.

"I will completely focus on the senior circuit from now on and looking forward to playing in Iran and Uganda next month. My aim now is to improve my senior ranking. If I can weave some good performances and get into the top 200 by end of the year that would be great." Tasnim, who is supported by OGQ, is currently ranked a lowly 602 in the women's singles.

SPORTOON



Countdown starts: Olympics silver-medal winning wrestler Ravi Dahiya takes part in a relay of the Queen's Baton for the Birmingham Commonwealth Games, at the Major Dhyan Chand National Stadium, in New Delhi, on January 12. PTI

RAMJI
SRINIVASAN

FUTURE ATHLETES IN MOTION

As sports is evolving and progressing at a terrific pace, athletes using cutting edge technology prudently understand what is happening inside their body during a game.

Technology and sport: Runners during a long-distance road relay. The concept of digital athlete is to create a fool proof system for peak performance and injury prevention through specialised individualised fitness training protocols. Putting an athlete through game situation and understanding the body mechanics under various patterns and its relation to the stress and strain on the muscles and joints can be precisely understood. The data inferred is highly individualistic and moving away from generalised predictions. AFP

When the whole world is moving towards using cutting edge technology not only in Space programme or Military, the idea has now percolated to sports performance, too, at various levels.

Digital shift is the key word in the future of athletes training and peak performance — the way forward in making a dream into reality, like a science fiction movie. Not only data collection of the athletes' fitness and workload management, now the idea has gone beyond imagination.

For the first time in the world, the Australian Institute of Sports (AIS) and its partners have pioneered in creating a cutting edge software and hardware used to create a new paradigm shift in sport science and performance.

The concept of digital athlete is to create a fool proof system for peak performance and injury prevention through specialised individualised fitness training protocols.

This concept is designed involving highly specialised bio-mechanists, film animation specialists, exercise physiologists, sports medicine experts and other technical support systems and staff.

Specialised cutting edge film scanning technology like MRI, motion capture in 3D axis, highly specialised software etc, are used to replicate the individual's muscle, joints, bones and the respective body contouring. This technology helps in understanding the stress and strains of the internal tissues and joints on a given condition specific to each sport and skill. Accurate life like model is created through various technical inputs.

The idea is like a bio-passport or an

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individual thumb impression biometric system. Each athlete's unique bio print would be a cutting edge information like none other before.

Putting an athlete through game situation and understanding the body mechanics under various patterns and its relation to the stress and strain on the muscles and joints can be precisely understood. The data inferred is highly individualistic and moving away from generalised predictions regarding the performance of injury.

Each athlete reacts differently to the same stimulus and response. The new system helps in understanding the nuances in body dynamics, replicating the game scenario for each athlete.

Real time data collection is the key in knowing how the joints, muscles and body function at a competitive scenario and derive a specific data for each individual according to their sport and skill.

For example: When an athlete is in acceleration or deceleration or involved in rotational or lateral movements, the data collected can give nearly accurate inference on the body position and dynamics with the stress and strain at every joint involved.

As sports is evolving and progressing at a terrific pace, athletes using cutting edge technology prudently understand what is happening inside their body during a game. Each athlete is unique and the athletes compete with each other vigorously, giving themselves the tool to understand their bodies better with real data rather than an opaque system. This specialised concept can be used for all athletes including para athletes and even in sports involving animals and machines. The scope is huge and using it prudently with the right inference is the key to top performance.

In future this specialised tool can be a great coaching and analysis tool, enhancing the performance of the team or an individual athlete precisely. Coaching the athlete to pin-point accuracy can be achieved through science and technology. Sticking to basics is one thing, but the concept of basics keeps changing every day and to each athlete, depending on where they are in the performance pyramid.

In future, refining of the technology would create an even more powerful tool for peak performance and injury prevention.

Specialised research domain can be created in understanding the athletes' physiology in motion inside their bodies, which would be a game changer in peak performance.

With new LTAD (Long Term Athlete Development) model in place, we in India need to look at embracing technology combined with human intervention to create medal winners in Olympics and other top level sporting competitions. Unless and until we embrace technology and put it to best use, we would be fighting the war with sticks and stones, when others are using lasers.

Of unwritten books

In *My Unwritten Books*, the critic George Steiner says, "A book unwritten is more than a void. It is the unwritten book which might have made the difference." I would like to believe that is true in the case of my unwritten books, but I know it cannot be!

SURESH MENON

In 1986, after India and Australia concluded the second-ever tied Test, in Chennai, I had an idea. I would write a book on that one match. There was a precedent — Jack Fingleton's *The Greatest Test of All* was an account of the first tie a quarter century earlier.

To write a book about a single match had its challenges, but there is even a book (a monograph, actually) on a single innings: John Arlott's *Alletson's Innings*, about Notts batsman Edwin Alletson making 189 in 90 minutes in 1911.

In the end, my book was not written. My sports editor wrote to the publishers pitching it — and neither of us heard from them again!

I was reminded of this and other unwritten books when an interviewer asked me in connection with a recent book of mine — *Why Don't You Write Something I Might Read? Reading, Writing and Arrhythmia* — if I hadn't written a dozen books on the game. No I haven't. But my unwritten books might reach that figure.

My next unwritten book was a ghost-written autobiography of Mohinder Amarnath. We spent time in Jamshedpur during a Ranji Trophy match and then over subsequent meetings had many informal chats. I was keen — especially at the prospect of spending time with Lala Amarnath, one of the most fascinating cricketers to play for India — but nothing came of that either.

The closest I came to writing a cricket book before I actually wrote one was on the inaugural tour of South Africa in 1992-93. A leading publisher called me up at *Indian Express* where I was sports editor and set the ball rolling. We met ahead of the tour, and in South Africa I made lots of notes. It was a historical tour, and there was plenty happening on and off the field. But on my return to India, the publisher seemed to have lost interest. I was foolish; I should have insisted on a contract and an advance rather than promises.

Didn't take off: "Among my unwritten books was a ghost-written autobiography of Mohinder Amarnath. We spent time in Jamshedpur during a Ranji Trophy match and then over subsequent meetings had many informal chats, but nothing came of that," says the author. GETTY IMAGES

In *My Unwritten Books*, the critic George Steiner says, "A book unwritten is more than a void. It is the unwritten book which might have made the difference." I would like to believe that is true in the case of my unwritten books, but I know it cannot be!

At different times, some half a dozen Indian cricketers were keen on their autobiographies and asked if I could write them. In one case, I brought the player and the publisher together, and we discussed the project in some detail. But again, things didn't work out. I may have been to blame in some of these instances as other issues (mainly the matter of finding time) cropped up.

Sometimes I wonder which performance I might choose if I were to write about a single innings. Perhaps Vinoo Mankad's 184 at Lord's in 1952 (he made 72 in the first innings and had match figures of 5 for 231 in 97 overs). That would be an impressive addition to my list of unwritten books.